

THE BIRTH STORIES

The four earliest recorded accounts of Jesus' birth are each different, thus illustrating our bedrock diversity as religious liberals. In short, Unitarian Universalists cherish variety not conformity in our spiritual perspectives. Let's revisit these four distinct versions of the nativity scene and see what we find.

Luke shared joy. He answered the birth with a romantic narrative of visionary shepherds, unsophisticated wise guys, a paranoid, vindictive king, winged-messengers, and a virgin mother. A celebrative account flooded with the incredulous. Singing and dancing were unleashed throughout Bethlehem.

Luke posits that even reasonable people, when touched by the spirit, can do things divinely foolish. There's an exuberance to Luke's Christmas: the candles, the carols, the cookery, and the kindness. Luke describes the Nazarene's entrance with the lilt of poetry rather than the tedium of prose.

Luke would have resonated with the playfulness captured in the "The Twelve Days of Christmas." "On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me... a partridge in a pear tree..." The frolicking carol proceeds with a list of riotously inappropriate and ludicrous gifts, such as "two turtle doves, three French hens, six geese laying, seven swans singing, eight maids milking." On and on, the song gambols. Is it nonsense? To the mind, yes; to the heart, no! Not by a jugful of wassail.

Then there's the Grinch! In Dr. Seuss's book, the Grinch couldn't steal Christmas. Even when he took the tree and the stockings and the turkey and all the gifts, the Grinch

still heard every Who in Who-ville, the tall and small alike, singing on Christmas morning...even without presents! As Dr. Seuss tells it:

And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so? Christmas came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes or bags!" And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before! "Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!" And what happened then...? Well, in Who-ville they say that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day.

Same with us. Our intellect may sort out fantasies from fact concerning Jesus' birth; it may even lure us into a fit of scroogeness. But rationality can't steal or destroy the bone-deep joy intrinsic in the nativity scene. If we allow ourselves to feel the sparkle of Christmas, then our heart, just like the Grinch's, can't help but grow bigger!

Luke's vision was genuinely his own. While it's the one Western Christendom knows and loves the best, it was only one.

Matthew carries some of the same Lucan narrative yet authors a definite variation, oft-forgotten amid our holiday revelry. Matthew registers pain when he responds to the barn birth. He alone of the early four gospel storytellers relates two incidents of anguish.

The first incident relates the agony that Joseph felt when he discovered that Mary is pregnant, not by him, and quietly considers a divorce. Yes, not every pregnancy is a welcome or happy one. Joseph did not initially experience the same kind of joy felt by Josh and Rachel Garcia.

And then there's the travesty laid bare in Herod's vicious plotting to murder Jesus and "all the male children in Bethlehem and in that entire region who were two years old and under." Herod failed to kill Jesus, but he didn't fail to slaughter the other blameless children.

Consequently, we mourn for all innocent people put to death because of brute power and greed. Right now, in this country and across the globe. A voice is heard in Ramah, wrote Jeremiah, sobbing and bitterly lamenting. It is Rachel weeping for her children because they are no more.

With unexpected pregnancy came anguish for Joseph. With the birth of Jesus came death to innocents.

You and I know full well that the holidays rarely deliver pure delight, but are regularly awash in immense sorrow, even despondency. And it's vital to have this sentiment authenticated in the Christian scriptures.

So, if you come to the holiday season sad and out of sorts, this year or any other year, you should feel right at home. If you're alienated from a loved one, grieving over job turmoil or international strife, you're not alone. You're feeling feelings others have felt before you, still feel around you, and will feel long after you've died.

Understandably, our personal losses—divorces, deaths and disappointments—are magnified during this interval of presumed whoopee. When my father died in 1987, on Christmas Eve, I knew that my own holiday celebrations and memories would never be the same again.

Indeed, no holiday season arrives now without my feeling the poignant combination of irrevocable joy and bone-deep sorrow. Unfailingly, I huddle close amid loved ones, sing lustily, and weep quietly during the dark, dank grief-laden days of December. All the way to my grave, my Christmases will prove more painful yet more expansive in spiritual size.

The sadness of the holidays is neither superficial nor removable. Sadness makes December a holy, as well as *wholly*, season not just a sentimental outburst of merriment.

Matthew's mission is to remind us that Christmas isn't merely for the maddeningly jovial but also for those who are saddled with pain. Christmas in its huge stretch of meanings, often ambivalent meanings, is a season of trouble and travail—yea, a season beset even by a possible divorce and actual deaths.

Remember Santa Claus wasn't born on the tropical shores of Tahiti but along the frozen canals of Holland in the mythical character of Kris Kringle who first brought a dowry to poor girls, and then showered gifts upon all the needy children in the middle of winter.

So, if you're numbered among those who rarely find cause to be jolly at Christmas, then join the club, a sizable one at that. Indeed, if you resonate more with Matthew's response to Jesus birth than that of Luke, worry not...there'll always be plenty of room for you at our Fellowship festival table.

And John. Alas, he leaves out any birth incident—pleasant or painful. He declares instead of narrates. For John's a theologian. His offering isn't a story but an affirmation, a claim, and a hope. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt (literally, *tabernacled*) in our midst," wrote John. A faith-claim that the same God that covenanted with Moses, argued with Gideon, struggled within Jeremiah...that same Spirit had returned, incarnating a fresh and robust love in the Bethlehem birth.

Oh, the many words, good and righteous words, we mouth in abundance during the holiday season, words which unfortunately seldom become flesh, remaining but pious

platitudes. John reminds us to en flesh some of our noble sentiments this time around the calendar. As well as in the days and nights that follow.

You know what? When we have ideas, they're often tame and wooden, but when ideas grasp us, then life occurs, they become flesh.

This season of the year, the Muslims are observing Ramadan, the lunar month in which the Qur'an was first revealed, a holy night in which the Word of God was born. And during December, Jews have completed their eight-day Festival of Lights (Hanukkah), commemorating the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem after the city was conquered and defiled.

Imagine what would happen if the followers of these three great Abrahamic faiths, along with anyone else who cared to join the caravan, would light lamps or candles as a consecration of the temple of peace in the very city that these great religions all claim?

Imagine scrubbing the temple walls, not only in Jerusalem but also all over the world, to remove the bloody stains of secular and religious justification for warfare, genocide, bigotry, and slavery?

Imagine that each of us might vow to pass the lamp of peace on to the next generation? Imagine that every one of us, who claims to be a card-carrying spiritual pilgrim, would speak peace, moreover, would incarnate peace...our very words become actual flesh, starting in our hearts and our homes? "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me..." resounds the song.

But there's more. Mark, actually the first gospel recorder of all, responds to Jesus' birth neither with joy nor with agony nor with affirmation but with silence. Amazingly,

he reports absolutely nothing concerning the birth. Mark begins his gospel story with Jesus' baptism. The Christmas happening in all of its Lucan splendor, Matthean anguish, and Johannean proclamation is simply absent in Mark. Speechless. Perhaps Mark was overwhelmed. Maybe he was unmoved. We'll never know. In any case, Mark simply chose not to write anything about the birth of Jesus.

Surely, Christmas is the season when we need to hush for a moment, many moments in fact, and simply hunker down and fully listen. Christmas is the time to cease chattering, shopping, eating, even laughing—long enough to embrace meaning beyond sound and replenishment without words. Now is the season to be still and wordless. Yes, silence will always constitute an honest and honorable response to the birth of the Prince of Peace.

Luke celebrated, Matthew anguished, John affirmed, and Mark was silent.

In this simple yet poignant collection of scriptural responses to Jesus' birth lies the enduring message of our liberal religious path. For each of us composes our own version of the Christmas story. We, like the four gospel writers, must meet and make our Christmas meanings, year after year after year.

Shalom, salaam, namaste, blessed be and Amen.

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