

CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY

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I love Christmas Eve at All Souls. The soft candlelight and the sublime music, the cheer of familiar carols and the call of ancient stories, the crush of friendly people and the hush of heightened expectation: this is the heart of the holiday season. By the time this service ends and you walk back out into the cold night air, it will be [almost] Christmas Day.

Hopefully, you have completed your Christmas shopping, or at least most of it. But my guess is that you haven't thought much about what you most want for Christmas. I'm not talking about what you hope to unwrap tomorrow morning, but rather what you really, deeply want. What you long for more than anything. If you don't know, you've come to the right place to find out.

Christmas is about our desire for things that can't be put in a box: our longing for a light to show us the way, a balm to soothe our physical and emotional wounds, a comforter to relieve our existential restlessness. Christmas is about hoping that somehow our lives and our world will be transformed, even made new.

All too often, Christmas shopping is a distraction that leaves us wanting not too much for Christmas, but too little. At its heart, Christmas is about the gift of love in human form, not the gift of things in package form. Besides, the gifts you give are a symbol of your love, not the substance of it.

According to the Christian New Testament, the story of Christmas had nothing to do with colorfully trimmed trees or brightly wrapped presents or lovingly prepared family dinners. Nor did it have anything to do with the birth of a child in the usual sense. The angel who appeared to the shepherds described the meaning of the occasion simply: "I bring you good news of a great joy for all the people," the angel proclaimed. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David..." — what?

A baby? No, babies are born every night of the year. Each child is special, but we do not celebrate Christmas every time a child is born. Unto you is born a king? No, although many of Jesus' contemporaries did hope he would lead the Jews to overthrow their brutal Roman overlords. Unto you is born a prophet? No, apocalyptic prophets were plentiful in those harrowing days. In the angel's words, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior." Christmas is about the coming of a savior.

This is good news, of course, only if a savior is what you need. And it's especially good news only if you need a savior badly. As Unitarian Universalists, we reject the view that an original sin doomed humanity and required God to descend in human form to redeem us.

Nonetheless, we need a savior too, sometimes — not to save our souls for eternity, but to redeem our lives here and now. We need salvation from despair, or failure, or greed, or anger, or loneliness, or grief, or selfishness. In the hour of our need, we put our faith in what the poet William Blake calls the human form of love divine. For us, the gifts we give and receive at Christmas symbolize our belief that love can save us too.

The contemporary poet Mark Doty emphasizes this point in his poem titled “Messiah (Christmas Portions).” It tells the story of a small-town performance of Handel’s *Messiah* on a December afternoon in a little Methodist church near the sea. The members of the Choral Society gather in their best blacks and whites on the makeshift stage of the church. The poem describes the singers as a ragtag lot: altos from the A&P, sopranos from the T-shirt shop, a neighbor who fights operatically with her girlfriend, and the friendly bearded clerk from the post office, who may be a tenor trapped in the body of a baritone.

Today, however, they’re all poise, costume, and purpose. As silence falls in the hall, the audience anticipates the performance warily, as if they’re about to open a gift they’re not sure they will like. These doubts begin to vanish when the violins begin to play. Doty writes:

Who’d have thought
they’d be so good?...
This music
demonstrates what it claims:
glory shall be revealed. If art’s
acceptable evidence,
mustn’t what lies
behind the world be at least
as beautiful as the human voice?

Just as the ragtag singers have been transformed by glorious music, the poem goes on to say, we too can be transformed by the desire this season awakens in us. The poem concludes:

Aren’t we enlarged
by the scale of what we’re able
to desire?
... Inside these wrappings
burns another, brighter life,
quicken, now,

by song: hear how
it cascades, in overlapping,

lapidary waves of praise? Still time.
Still time to change.

The word desire comes from the Latin prefix “de,” meaning down from, and the Latin word “sidus,” meaning heavenly body. Desire, in other words, comes down to us from the heavens and lifts us up toward them. Our lives are enlarged by the scale of what we are able to desire. Inside these seasonal wrappings lies a deeper desire for a brighter life, a desire quickened now by the songs and stories of the season.

As you look at your life in the reflected glow of the Christmas star, from what do you need to be saved? What brighter life do you imagine for yourself, and for those you love, and for the world we share?

At its most potent, the gifts of love we give and receive each Christmas provides us with courage to expand the scale of our desire. Love given away becomes love multiplied, which leaves less and less room in the world for despair, loneliness, grief, and other forms of sadness. The human form of love turns out to be divine — a saving presence where it’s needed most.

It’s nearly Christmas, but not quite. There’s still time. Still time to want a brighter, more abundant life. Still time to change.