

## Christmas Eve 8p “Adult-Themed”

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 24 December 2007  
Chip Roush

OPENING WORDS Come they told me, pa rum pum pum pum. A new born King to see, pa rum pum pum pum. Our finest gifts we bring, To lay before the King, So to honor Him, When we come.

Little Baby, pa rum pum pum pum. I am a poor boy too. I have no gift to bring, That's fit to give a King, pa rum pum pum pum. Shall I play for you? Mary nodded, The ox and lamb kept time, I played my drum for him, I played my best for him, pa rum pum pum pum.

The story of a baby born in a manger, 2000 years ago, is a metaphor. It does not matter if a person named Jesus was born with angels overhead and wise folk bearing gifts. What does matter is that Life and Love are reborn every night; and that we each have a gift to use to honor and serve those ideals. May this night remind us of the gifts we bring; and may it give us hope and inspiration, to play our very best. Pa rum pum pum pum.

OPENING HYMN Joy to the world! The word is come; let earth with praises ring! Joy to the world; the lord is come; let earth receive her king. While we are usually quite careful with the hymns we sing, so that objectionable theology does not come sneaking in on a catchy melody, I do make exceptions for the Christmas carols I learned as a child. With this and every hymn tonight, please sing the version that brings you the most joy. {sing *Joy to the World*}

### FIRST READING

Anne Sexton was born in Massachusetts, in 1928. While in therapy for bipolar disorder, her doctor suggested she take up poetry, and thus was born one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's finest poets.

Snow, blessed snow, comes out of the sky like bleached flies. The ground is no longer naked. The ground has on its clothes. The trees poke out of sheets and each branch wears the sock of God.

There is hope. There is hope everywhere. I bite it. Someone once said: Don't bite till you know if it's bread or stone. What I bite is all bread, rising, yeasty as a cloud.

There is hope. There is hope everywhere. Today God gives milk and I have the pail.

READINGS About the time Jesus was born, the Romans had occupied the territories for long enough to tax most of the inhabitants into poverty. As he grew up, Jesus heard the tales of once-proud people reduced to living hand-to-mouth. He spoke out against this, and other, injustice—and eventually was killed for it. But his words and deeds lived on in the hearts and imaginations of his followers. Even the destruction of Jerusalem did not slow the spread of his myth.

Approximately sixty years after Jesus' death, the gospel of Mark became the first gospel to be written down. The gospels of Matthew and Luke were written ten or fifteen years later. They have much of the same material as the earlier text, but unlike Mark, they include stories of Jesus' birth. First, we'll hear Matthew's version, in the King James translation:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to

Herod, they departed into their own country another way. And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt.

And this is Luke's version:

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David;) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

REFLECTION I have a friend who almost experienced a Christmas miracle last week. She had stayed up well after the kids were in bed, past her own normal bedtime, in order to get a few more Christmas tasks completed. Finally, after midnight, she was on her way to bed when something made her check her freezer. She opened the freezer door, and saw an odd glow. Bending to down to peer more deeply into its recesses, she saw something glowing bright orange. When she reached toward it, she felt heat coming off it, and quickly pulled her hand back. She slammed the freezer shut, and unplugged it, and ran upstairs to get her husband to help her, all the while giving thanks for her Christmas miracle. Had she not decided to look in the freezer, she was certain it would have burst into flames, and she had a clear picture in her mind's eye of her tossing her children out their bedroom windows into the deepest snow banks, to cushion their fall, because the inferno beneath them prevented their escape otherwise. A miracle had saved her family!

The next day, the repairman actually laughed at her call. "It's a self-defrosting freezer," he said. "If it makes you feel better, I get a call like this about once a week." So, it was a miracle, if you consider self-defrosting freezers to be a miracle, and compared to some of the freezers I defrosted by hand, I am willing to grant it minor-miracle status, but it wasn't a quote-real-unquote miracle.

Why are so many of us humans so quick to believe in miracles? I am sure there are a lot of reasons, but one of the reasons might be that miracles let us off the hook. If miracles occur, we have less responsibility for our lives and our world. Some hero will come along and fix things, so we don't have to.

And, at another level, miracles imply that *only* heroes can do such things. Because the miraculous does occur, we ordinary humans cannot, and indeed should not even try, to work for our own—and our planet's—salvation.

In some ways, it is nice to believe in Santa Claus, because a world where such miracles occur is a more fantastic place. On the other hand, I like playing Santa Claus and making or buying just the right gifts for my loved ones...

READINGS Hannah McCarthy-Stone is the daughter of Karen McCarthy, our Director of Religious Education. Hannah wrote this for a school essay, this year.

I was small, maybe six or seven, and I had the Christmas Fever. It was the middle of December, that time of year when almost every child in America gets antsy. I can't remember what I had asked for that year, so obviously it wasn't that important to me; probably a teddy bear, or some SpongeBob paraphernalia. But that was a special Christmas; it was an Earth-shattering Christmas, a foundation-shaking, childhood milestone of a Christmas. It was the Christmas I lost my last childhood naïveté: my belief in Santa Claus. Every healthy child believed in Santa. He was a mystery, the great jelly-belly jolly old man on the North

Pole that no one had ever actually seen, but nearly everyone had said so, had spun some elaborate story about sneaking down the stairs at midnight and catching Mr. Claus bent over the plate of cookies. Each one ended with the kid getting an extra present. I never told one of those, probably because the only time I ever really lied was in fourth grade, when we were taking a trip to Hartwick Pines and Mr. Mummert asked if we had any allergies. I raised my hand and proceeded to explain that if I got a bee sting it would swell up and turn purple. I don't lie for a reason. I had been Christmas shopping downtown, scouring the various shops for the perfect trinket or toy for every member of my family. I had probably stuffed every bag inside the big, blue, smooth plastic Toy Harbor one, because it always had room, and it had a handle so I could leave one hand free. When I got home, my ears were frostbitten and my toes were wet, but I was fancy-free. I loved the part of Christmas where I ran through the house with the slippery bag under one arm, so no one would see what was in it. I would dart up the two flights of stairs in our hundred-year-old Victorian, up to the office with the futon and the LP collection and the wrapping paper. That day, I was looking forward to spending hours listening to the radio carols and the rustling of the paper and ribbons, choosing each person's wrapping according to his or her taste. At the top of the second flight, my stocking feet thudding on the old blue carpet, I noticed in the other third floor room something I didn't recognize: a small, porcelain angel figurine. I still remember it; it was dark-skinned, its painted hair bulled back in a bun and tied with a ribbon, its praying hands and the folds of its gold and red dress forever set in pottery. It was beautiful, I wanted to touch it, but I had no time for such trivialities. There were presents to be wrapped. Christmas Eve rolled around, my presents lonely and small under the huge, green Douglas fir. (The gifts from my parents always appeared the same time as Santa's.) My sister Emma and I shared a room then, so we shared also our mother when she came to tuck us in and sing the ritual "Still, Still, Still" like she did every Christmas Eve. All year round we would beg her to sing it, but she insisted that it was only for Christmas. (Years later I sang it in choir, but it retains its magic Christmas Eve.) We would lie in our beds, squirming with anticipation and watching the huge snowflakes fall lazily onto our already white roof. I can't remember once staying awake until the end of that enchanting song, but I know that by 6:00 am I was up. Every year until about 2004 my family had to warn me that I must let them sleep on Christmas until at least 7:00. That may seem early, but because my parents divorced when I was two I've always split Christmas Day. This particular Christmas morning was at my Mother's house, so when I woke up I had to lie in bed, butterflies wrestling in my stomach, to wait until I knew it was safe to at least crawl into bed with my mother and stepfather and accidentally-on-purpose rub my cold toes on their warm legs so that they would turn over and put their arms around me and whisper, "Hannah, it's only 6:25. Go back to sleep," even though they knew that was never going to happen, and so I would get back up and stand at the top of the stairs, staring down at the pink glow of the tree lights, trying to guess whether or not Santa ate the cookies and seeing whose stocking was fattest this year. Finally my moment came. I was always allowed the honor of waking up my grumpy sisters, shaking their blanketed feet and saying, "get up, get up, it's Christmas!" And finally they'd stumble out of bed and we'd all head down the stairs. I headed the procession that year. I thundered down the stairs, flew to the parlor and plopped down on our couch, or as we called it, the Lap of Luxury. I drank in the beauty of the Christmas spread, the succulent boxes, the tantalizing packages, the delicious gift bags with snowmen and Santa Clauses printed on them. Then I saw the stockings. I found mine, grey with green snowflakes. It had candy canes sticking out of the top, the big kind, so I reached down for one; just as I was about to grab it, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a small, content, porcelain brown face. It was protruding from another family member's stocking, just the head and shoulders showing, the neck bent forward as if in apology. I was shaken, but said nothing to disrupt my family's Christmas morning. But that face didn't leave my mind, even after the drive up to my dad's with the ritual listening to Dylan Thomas reading "A Child's Christmas in Wales." For a few years after that, until I decided I was of an age to no longer officially Believe in Santa, I kept this realization to myself. To this day, every year my Mom asks me if I want to help fill the stockings, and I refuse. Even though that angel brought me to the truth, the magic still holds true for me. I still get Christmas Fever.

READING Eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon wrote a letter to the editor of New York's *Sun* newspaper, and veteran newsman Francis Pharcellus Church wrote a quick response, which was printed as an unsigned editorial on Sept. 21, 1897. Church's answer has since become history's most reprinted newspaper editorial. Without changing the gendered language of the time, here is the exchange:

"DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, 'If you see it in THE SUN it's so.' Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus? VIRGINIA O'HANLON.

VIRGINIA, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except [what] they see. They think that nothing can be, which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies! You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You may tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest man, nor even the united strength of all the strongest men that ever lived, could tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, VIRGINIA, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding.

No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood."

READINGS Heather Shumaker has a personal story to share. {her story}

READING Joyce Schowalter is the editor of the "Heroic Stories" emails. Approximately weekly, she sends out a story about some person acting more or less heroically. This was mailed a few weeks ago.

"I work in the children's department of a major department store. In February 2005 I encountered a customer of Arab descent, or so I assumed at the time because of her clothing. She was dressed in black and gray from head to toe, including having most of her face covered. She was looking around guiltily because she was about to rip open a packaged dress shirt. It's no big deal really. Everybody does it. Because of my training, my first thought was "theft", because she was acting so guilty.

But then I saw her eyes: she was AFRAID.

I approached her and asked if she needed help. She was clutching a dress shirt for boys, and now she looked terrified. It was amazing how much emotion I could see in her eyes. I believe in "eye contact" and looking someone in the eye when speaking with them, but how often do we \*really\* do this? In fact, it's possible that not being able to see her whole face helped me to see "her".

She didn't speak English. She kept pointing at a 9- or 10-year-old boy and almost wringing the shirt she was clutching. That was easy enough to understand without words, "Does it fit him?" I asked her to hand me the shirt and showed her the trick to open the package without ripping it apart. Suddenly the fear in her eyes was gone, replaced by smiling eyes. After that, I helped her to find a different tie than the one she had picked, because it didn't go with the suit she had.

Then she started saying a lot of words I didn't understand and patting me on the arm. I knew she meant a very enthusiastic thank you. I was glad I could help her.

When I came in to work the next day, I was told there were some "strange" Arabs waiting for an employee in the children's department. The lady had come in again, with her daughter to translate. My boss had guessed she wanted me, and told her when I would be in. They waited for me.

Through her daughter, this is what she said. "I have been in this country one month. I find nothing but hostile and danger eyes. I am not a terrorist. My family is not terrorists. You are the only one to see this. You treat me kind, even though I misbehave. I thank you."

She gave me a jade green amulet. Her daughter said it is a symbol of humanity. I will treasure it always, as a reminder that we are all just people. Each of us is an individual with our own unique story.”

READING Another email list I’m on is Garrison Keillor’s “Writer’s Almanac.” Every day he shares a bit about the famous people and famous events that occurred on that date. This is from December 6<sup>th</sup>.

“And it was on this day in 1917 that an accidental explosion destroyed a quarter of the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia. It was the height of World War I, and Halifax was serving as an important port city for many of the ships carrying supplies for the battlefield. One of the ships coming into the port that day was a French supply ship called the *Mont Blanc*, carrying 200 tons of TNT, 2300 tons of other explosives, as well as ten tons of cotton, and thirty-five tons of highly flammable chemicals stored in vats on the ship’s upper deck. On its way into port, the *Mont Blanc* collided with a Norwegian freighter, which started a fire, and the crew of the *Mont Blanc* piled into lifeboats and then paddled frantically away.

The fire on the *Mont Blanc* drew a crowd of onlookers along the shore of the channel. The docks filled with spectators, trams slowed down, people stood at office windows and on factory roofs to see the blaze. Then, a few minutes after the fire had started, the *Mont Blanc* exploded. It was the single most powerful man-made explosion at that point in human history.

The blast wave of water hit the shore, sweeping away buildings, bridges, roads, vehicles, and people. City streets split open. Houses, churches, schools, and factories collapsed. Virtually every building in the city had its windows broken. About a quarter of the city was completely destroyed. More than 2,000 people were killed and more than 9,000 were injured. It was the worst disaster of any kind in Canadian history.

One of the only people who had known about the cargo of the ship was a dispatcher at the yardmaster’s office. As soon as he’d realized what was happening, he began telegraphing warnings around the city, and he kept sending out warnings even though he knew that an explosion could come at any minute. He died at his post.”

MUSIC When our religious ancestor, Edmund Hamilton Sears, wrote a Christmas carol with a social-ethical message, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people harrumphed, “peace on earth and good will? Just the sort of thing you would expect from a Unitarian!” Just the thing, indeed. Please rise as you are willing and able and join in singing #244 *It Came upon the Midnight Clear*

{singing}

REFLECTION The miracle is not that a fat man in a red suit delivers gifts to six billion people in one night; the miracle is not that a baby was born to a virgin, and angels appeared in the sky; the miracle is that love and hope and joy and generosity live so deeply in the human breast that even in the most difficult times, a glimmer still shines in our souls.

It may be too dim for us to see it ourselves, but it is there, burning inside us with a miraculously beautiful glow.

CANDLE CEREMONY Albert Schweitzer wrote, “at times, our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” Tonight we will enact that story by rekindling the light in the candles we hold.

{singing *Silent Night* & candlelighting}

The hope and solidarity of this moment, the light and love and peace of this shared instant is always available to us, always within our hearts and minds, if we remember to seek it.

May the memory of this moment, this light and these voices, make it easier for us to experience it, or share it, anytime we want to or need to, in the coming year.

So may we be.