

Christmas Eve 4p "Family Service"

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

STORY I invite our Director of Religious Education, Karen McCarthy, to come forward and tell the story of "Grandmother Tree and the Stars." This version of the story has been adapted from an unknown author by the Rev. Ms. Tamara Lebak.

In a great oak forest, where the trees grow tall and majestic, there was a little apple tree. It was the only apple tree in that forest. Winter came and as the snow blanketed the forest floor, it covered all of the branches of that little apple tree. One night when the moon was full, the little apple tree looked up into the sky and saw a wonderful sight: between the branches of all the other trees, the little apple tree saw the stars in the sky. And those stars looked like they were dangling from the branches of the mighty oak trees. "Oh Grandmother Tree, Oh Grandmother Tree," whispered the little apple tree, "How lucky those oak trees are to have such beautiful stars hanging on their branches. I want more than anything in the world to have stars on my branches! Then I would feel truly special." Grandmother Tree looked down on the little apple tree and said gently "Have patience.. Have patience little apple tree." Time passed and the snow melted. Spring came and tiny blossoms appeared on the branches of the little apple tree. Beautiful birds came to rest on its branches. The sweet smell of the apple tree's blossoms filled the air. All summer, the apple tree grew and grew, and formed a canopy of leaves overhead. But night after night, the little apple tree looked up at the sky filled with millions and millions of stars and cried out, "Oh Grandmother Tree, Oh Grandmother Tree, I would give anything to have stars on my branches and in my leaves like those oaks ." "You have so many gifts", said Grandmother Tree, "you have shade to offer, and fragrant blooms, and branches for birds to nest in and who sing you their songs." "Oh Grandmother Tree" The apple tree sighed, "that is not special enough! What I really want more than anything is to have stars, not blossoms on my branches ." Grandmother Tree smiled and answered "Be patient little apple tree." The seasons changed again and soon the apple tree was filled with beautiful apples. Whoever saw the apple tree would stop and reach up, and pick an apple to eat. They were juicy and sweet. Much like this one...(take out apple) And still, when the night came to the forest, the apple tree gazed at the stars in the sky and called out. "Oh Grandmother Tree, I want more than anything in the world to have stars on my branches! Then I would feel truly special !" And Grandmother tree asked "But you have such marvelous gifts of apples to offer. Doesn't that make you feel special?" And without saying a word, the apple tree answered by shaking its branches from side to side (can you be the tree?? Parents can join in too if they'd like to stand up and make a tree) now shake your branches. And at that moment, Grandmother Tree and all the oak trees began to sway with a wind that began to blow and that made the apple tree begin to shake. And from the top of the apple tree an apple fell, and when it hit the ground it split open. "Look," said Grandmother Tree, "..Look inside yourself and tell me what you see?" The apple tree also looked into the inside of that apple and saw a star. "A Star! I have a star!" And Grandmother Tree laughed a gentle laugh and said "you've had stars on your branches all along, and you just didn't know it."

REFLECTION How many of you have heard your parents talk about the day you were born? How many have heard the story often enough, that you can tell it yourself? How many of you have heard of the star of Bethlehem?

The star of Bethlehem was the bright star that shined over the stable where Baby Jesus was born. The star was so bright that the three kings used it to guide them, as they came to give the baby their gifts.

Now, that star may not have been as bright as the legends say. Sometimes, our stories get exaggerated the more often we tell them. My mother tells about going to a football game, the night before I was born. She says it was very cold that night. She has told that story probably 100 times, so that now, it sounds like it was the coldest night of the whole winter.

I think that might be the same thing that happened to the star of Bethlehem. There may have been a real star, but it may not have been as bright as people say. I don't mean that people are lying, I just think that they are making it sound more spectacular than it really was. They think that Jesus was pretty special, so his birth must have been special, too. If Jesus were born now, they might tell a story about a really bright star, or they might use other details to show how special they think he is. They might say, "when Jesus was born, the water in the west bay turned bright green, and it stayed green for a whole month." Or they

might say, “when Jesus was born, it was raining, and the sun came out so bright that there were rainbows everywhere. Everywhere you looked, you could see rainbows, welcoming the baby Jesus.”

Well, as we just heard, in Karen’s story, we are all special. We all have a star inside us, like the apple tree in the story.

So your parents might tell stories about the day you were born, with spectacular details to make the story as special as you.

So, maybe when {Sue} was born, every television channel had Dora the Explorer singing her name—even the channel that usually just has people talking, and numbers along the bottom, had Dora the Explorer singing {Sue, Sue}!

Or, the morning that {Ramon} was born, his dad was trying to cook something in the microwave, and as he pushed the buttons, they didn’t go “beep beep beep” like usual, but instead, they played his favorite song.

Or the night before {Hailey} was born, her mom got 22 green lights in a row. She drove from home to the store and back without once ever having to stop at a traffic light. That makes {Hailey} pretty special, don’t you think?

It does make her special, because we are *all* special. All of us have a star inside of us, shining brightly and beautifully, and all of us had a star shine above, the night when we were born.

READINGS The gospel of Mark was the first gospel written, probably around the year 60 of our common era. The gospel of Luke was written ten or fifteen years later. It has much of the same material as the earlier text, but unlike Mark, it includes a story of Jesus’ birth.

When King James put together a committee to translate the bible into English, around the year 1604, the committee wanted it to sound “ancient” and wise, so they used words like “thee” and “thou,” which had already passed out of common usage.

This is what the second chapter of Luke sounds like, in that translation: “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 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.”

In more modern language, we might hear that Mary and Joseph were traveling, but it was a very busy time, so every hotel and motel and inn said “no vacancy.” At last, one innkeeper took pity on Mary, because she was pregnant, and allowed the couple to sleep in his barn, with the animals. Well, Mary had her baby, and wrapped it in some of rags they found in the barn, and borrowed the feeding trough from the animals, to lay little baby Jesus in.

Meanwhile, a bunch of shepherds were out tending their sheep—which means keeping them from wandering off, in the daytime, and keeping wolves and coyotes away, at night. That night, instead of coyotes, angels appeared in the sky, and said that in a nearby barn, a hero had been born who would bring peace and love and justice to all the world.

The shepherds thought that was pretty cool, so they went to the barn to see for themselves. When they got there, they were joined by three travelers, who had been following a bright star—they had been walking for miles and miles, for days and weeks, because they, too, had learned that this baby Jesus was going to do great things.

The travelers brought gifts for the baby, gold and frankincense and myrrh, but all this activity attracted the attention of the local king, who was jealous and paranoid about keeping his power. So Mary and Joseph and their little baby left town before he could find them.

VIDEO Jesus grew up, and did indeed do some special things. He taught people to be kind to one another, and he healed sick people and fed hungry people. But again, his activities attracted the attention of the local leaders, and that time, he did not escape, but the powerful Romans had him killed.

His teachings, and his example were so powerful, so inspiring, that even today, 2000 years later, people still try to live their lives like he lived.

But before all that, before Jesus grew up, he was a little baby. Here is a video about that, by Carmen Borgia, who is a member of Fourth Universalist Church, in Manhattan.

{video: *Jesus was a Baby*}

READING Because Jesus was a very well-behaved little boy, as soon as he learned to write, he wrote a thank-you note to the three kings, who brought him gifts when he was born. I think it sounded something like:

Dear kings, Thank you for the gold and frankincense and myrrh. I like them very much. Mom says they have come in handy.

Also, thank you telling me that I am special. I try to do that, too. I tell all the people I meet that they are special. It does not matter if they are old or young, or fat or thin or if their skin is a different color, or if they are poor and their clothes are old. I always tell them they are special, and I treat them nicely.

Thank you, Jesus.

REFLECTION When Jesus grew up, he acted just like he said he would, in his letter.

Even though it was against the social customs of his people, and against the religious strictures of his faith tradition, and against the civil laws of the most powerful government on earth, Jesus treated *every* person he met with kindness and respect, and he insisted that we can do that, too.

It is not always easy to do. Sometimes, we can forget that we have that star inside, indicating we are special. Then we must depend on our friends or our family to remind us.

If we have forgotten about our star, or if it seems very faint and far away, our job is to reconnect with it, to listen to our friends—some of them maybe in this very room— who remind us.

If we haven't forgotten, if we feel our star shining brightly in us, our job is to remind others of their stars. We do this like Jesus did, by healing people and feeding them, and simply by telling them...

CANDLE CEREMONY

{singing *Silent Night* & lighting candles}

Each and every one of us, in this room, is special. We have stars above us, and stars inside us, and we can share our light with others.

So may we be.