

Christmas Eve 8:30pm

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 24 December 2006
Chip Roush

OPENING WORDS Our opening words this evening are adapted from Waldemar Argow

W. Waldemar W. Argow The festival and spirit of Christmas belong to the entire human race. Every people and every religion has attempted to state through the medium of poetry and symbolism what it felt was the truth about our common life. It is impossible for the human mind to comprehend abstract truth; hence, its constant use of symbolism and metaphor to express what the heart feels and the mind deduces.

Thus after many ages... came the story of a babe born in a manger, as if to link the highest with the lowliest, predicting a great future from simple beginnings: a blend of star light and stable straw; the divine and the commonplace. Here is the epic story of human life told in the most soulfully poetic manner. In this homey story dealing with elemental things we are told that our human life has been visited by God, touched from above, and thus forever haunted by divinity.

The belief—nay, more—the certain feeling, that God has incarnated Himself in this mortal life of ours, is the highest truth which the Christmas story seeks to make vivid. When, therefore, we are prone to grow cynical about human nature, speaking harsh words of criticism and condemnation because we imagine there is so little good about our jostling, blustering humanity, we shall indeed do well to remember that humanity [is also] the promising babe in the manger of God.

And so we rehearse the Christmas drama, not because we believe as literal historic fact the nativity legends, but because we have come to feel that the highest truth is not known by logic, but by love. After all, there may be nothing in the universe, even with its light-year measurements, greater than love that prostrates itself at a cradle.

OPENING HYMN And so, to celebrate the love and mystery of that age-old story, let us tell it again, at once ages old and ever-fresh. Let us tell it first in song: please rise as you are willing and able and join us in singing the first two verses of hymn #237, *The First Nowell*

{singing} Please be seated.

BIRTH NARRATIVE I

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. This is Luke 2:1, 3-19, in the King James 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. 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 Saviour, 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. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered

at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

BIRTH NARRATIVE II The gospel of Matthew was also written after Mark, and it contains a different tale around the birth of Jesus. These are the first twelve verses of chapter two, also 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

FIRST READING

Kaaren Solveig Anderson is the co-minister, with her husband, Scott Taylor, of the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York. This story is excerpted from her book of meditations, *Glad to be Human*

When I was a child, the day after Thanksgiving was steeped in ritual. Every year my family would travel to Chicago for the holiday festivities. Our tour was always the same: We'd tromp up and down Michigan Ave., admiring store windows with animated mechanical dolls that served as actors for the narrated holiday story. We would wait in line for two hours to sit under the three-story tree at Marshall Fields and enjoy a formal lunch, and sit on Santa's lap to discuss the finer points of our list. Then on to the Berghoff for dinner.

The day always held magic, mostly because of my dime-laden mittens. In the morning, my dad would give my sister and me each a handful of dimes, which I kept in my mittens so I could tinker with them as we walked in anticipation of finding another one of "them"—Salvation Army Christmas buckets. At almost every corner familiar red cans awaited. I marveled in watching my dimes swirl their way to the quarter-sized slot and plunk in to rest amid other dime-sized donations. At the time, I knew nothing about Salvation Army theology, only that they worked for the homeless and destitute. They became my symbol of generosity for the season, albeit bucket-sized.

As an adult, I often felt an odd pull to ring the bell myself. One year I gave in. I called up the lieutenant at the local Salvation Army and asked enthusiastically if they were in need of help. They were. I was given two assignments. I couldn't wait to get my hands on that little tinkly bell.

The first assignment was a busy street corner with a bookstore and coffee shop on either side. I rang my dinga-lingy bell in ten-degree weather with glee, stamping my feet periodically to stay warm. My smart bucket swung slightly in the breeze. It was an experience just as I had hoped: people asked me if I was warm enough, a couple bought me coffee, many smiled and simply wished me "Happy Holidays" as they passed. I marveled at the parade of dime donors and the familiar "plunk" of change that followed.

The second assignment was at a mall across from JC Penney's. Once again eager, I itched to start my ring-a-dinging. The lieutenant arrived to set up my bucket. My hands reached for the bell. No bell. He explained, "The mall owners have complained, no bells, only this." He handed me a sign.

The sign was attached to a long dowel. On the top of the dowel, two pieces of paper were stapled together over the center of the stick. One side read "DING," the other "DONG." Instead of ringing, I now had to flip a sign that read "DING-DONG." My little bucket instantly lost its ting-a-ling. My enthusiasm waned. I flipped in silent motion. It seemed absurd, but I went to work. People pushed past each other, mired in that Christmas hubbub that leans toward frustration, not joy. Then they'd spot me. Their faces would contort, scrunching up into laughter and that uncomfortable feeling when you're embarrassed and humored by someone at the same time. They would often throw in some dimes and say "Happy Holidays," barely able to stifle an awkward yet justifiable smirk. I fought hard not to feel like the sign was projecting my mental state to the mall community.

For four hours I flipped—the sign, that is. Ten minutes before I was to quit, this fellow in black cowboy boots and a ten-gallon hat walked up to me and laughed. He was full out chuckles, bent over, hysterically laughing. I stood taller, flipping my sign with increased vigor. I couldn't tell where he was going with this. When he finally stood up for air, his eyes were smiling, so I hoped for no malicious intent. But I also was ready to kick him in the shins for his reaction to me and my now stupid sign.

Then he said, KEVIN "I must say, I've never seen a sign like that before. Anybody that stands with a sign that says 'Ding-Dong' must be duly rewarded."

MAJA He reached into his back pocket and retrieved his wallet. Crisp bills lay neatly in uniform order. He ran through the fives, tens, and twenties, and got to a row of fifties. He pulled one out. A fifty. He neatly folded the bill and squeezed it into the bucket designed for coin donors. Nodding, he smiled right into my eyes and muttered,

KEVIN "Well, I never." MAJA Then he continued on through the mall with laughter that hung captive in the air like lingering pipe smoke.

I, on the other hand, began to turn that sign with a renewed vigor. I looked at each passerby with a new attitude, whether they snickered or smiled, donated or not. I now felt strangely in awe of my DING-DONG sign. I was unabashedly proud that I was stupid enough to stand in a mall tenaciously flipping a sign, waiting for humor and generosity to awaken someone's humdrum spirit. Waiting for it to finally dawn on me that my gifts of generosity and time needed to lose their pretenses in order for any true generosity to occur. Waiting, just to discover, that this season can still thrill and surprise. Waiting for magic, only to find that red buckets held it all the time. Even without the ding-a-ling. SECOND READING Wallace Robbins was born in Massachusetts in 1910. He served the First Unitarian Church of Worcester, and was President of Meadville Lombard Theological School from 1944-1956. This is adapted from his untitled text published in the *UU Christian Meditation Manual* twenty years ago.

"All over the place there are the season's displays of the stable, the swaddled child, the senile Joseph nodding at the shepherds and the three kings and, in their midst, dressed in lovely blue, is Mary smiling, virginally, as though someone *else* had just given birth to the baby.

How can such a wax-works speak to the broken-hearted, the weary, the death-haunted, the lonely? Where in these lighted creches is there a shadowed place for doubters, yes for blasphemers, for I speak for them, too. The myth has become mythological; the spirit has become spiritualized and "the light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" has been put on an on-and-off switch. The folly which deified Jesus has so dehumanized Mary and so emptied Joseph of manhood that we have nothing left to sympathize with the enfleshed souls of humanity.

Smash these powerless idols of sentimentality. Tell it in truth.

The afternoon was cold and Mary's coat was difficult to keep across her lowered and pendulous belly as she rode sideways on the little donkey. She was a mere girl in her teens, and Joseph seemed old to her for he was in fact approaching midlife now that he was in his thirties. He walked ahead, and the little donkey followed him, bobbing his head as he carried the girl's surprising weight.

In Bethlehem Joseph was grateful to the innkeeper who said to him: "Better get her under cover— use the stable if you want; there will be no charge."

The stable was in fact a cavern, completely sheltered from the winds and it drew a steady warmth out of the depth of the earth. The bodies and breath of huge oxen gave off heat. The straw made both mattress

and cover to the couple. Here it was that the labor began, sharper and sharper, finally rhythmic, and then void. There was no midwife; no mother or neighbor. Mary was alone except for Joseph who comforted and helped her. Stained with the blood and excrement in which new life enters into existence, the baby was born. Joseph slapped the baby boy and he cried out with breath, the same breath which God had breathed into the first man.

Mary gave up petticoats and scarves to Joseph's hands, and he used them to wrap the child warmly. He put him down in the feed trough, the child was safe there, and he turned his attention to Mary. She was resting. The world was a better place now for life had enlarged itself and the future was growing amongst them. Joseph smiled at Mary.

Here is an elemental truth. It does not come from a magic star or from the touch of an angel's feather. The light and the heavenly Host were only heraldic and celebrative of that truth which had emerged out of Mary's loins of pain and fear to be sheltered in the tenderness of Joseph's fatherly care. It is this reality which reminds us that the power of life and the majesty of love are located precisely where the heart is affrighted, where the pain is unendurable and the shadow of death lies densely dark.

Neither birth nor rebirth is without travail. We separate from the safety of the mother's body and the comforts of her warmth to cry out in the cold and adventures of the new life. And so it is, in age, that something of ease and security must be left behind if a great peace is to come. Our second birth is not easy either.

The footprints you need to follow lead to the stable. It is not high above in the heavens, but deep in the earth, amongst the lowly creatures, in the pain of your flesh and the agony of your soul that faith is generated and you shall be made new. If your Christmas cannot be merry, it can be holy."

HOMILY How many of you have ever helped arrange the figurines in a crèche— the animals, and shepherds, and angels and wise folk and of course, the holy family? How many named the angel either "Gloria" or "Harold"? How many of you have ever considered stealing the baby Jesus from out of a public nativity scene? I remember one story where the minister was disturbed to find the baby missing from his church's outdoor crèche. He searched around the setting, hoping that the vandals had only hidden little Jesus, in the stable or behind the camel, but he could not find it. He was about to go inside, to call the chairperson of the Nativity Scene Committee (a subcommittee of the decorations and aesthetics committee), when he saw a little boy pulling a wagon with what looked like his baby Jesus figure riding in the wagon. He waited for the boy to get closer, and used the time to count to ten, and defuse his anger.

He recognized the child, and called out, "Wylie, have you taken the baby Jesus from out of this manger, here?" "Yep," replied the boy. Still struggling to maintain his composure, the minister sputtered, "...why?" To which, young Wylie responded, "I prayed for a wagon for Christmas, and I promised him if I got it, I'd give him the first ride."

Such concrete thinking is common in children, but even in those adults able to work with abstraction and ambiguity, a baby is often a powerful symbol of hope and joy.

The Christmas holiday incorporates both a festival of light reminding us of the eventual return of warmth and radiance, and the powerful metaphor of the birth of the baby Jesus.

The birth of a infant is not merely a *sign* of hope, not just a promise, but actual *proof* that life will continue, at least a little longer.

This is why the authors of the gospels called Luke and Matthew made certain to include a birth narrative in their texts. The symbolic hope of the birth of a baby reinforced the hopeful message of Jesus' life and actions. Both his message *and* his legend were strengthened by this editorial inclusion.

This is also why the metaphor of rebirth is so powerful. From the phoenix, the fabled bird that rises from its own funeral ashes, to present-day Christians who claim to be "born again," even the most despairing of figures can be reborn into a state of hope.

Of course, as the reading from Wallace Robbins reminded us, that birth is usually a painful experience. For infants, and their mothers, and for most of us attempting to change our lives in significant ways, there can be both physical misery and psychological anguish.

It may require us to relinquish our dignity, to let go of the elaborate self that we've created over all these years, like the woman with the "ding-dong" sign in our reading.

It may require us to admit, and redress, some of the past mistakes we've made.

It often requires that we face our very deepest fears. But through that arduous process, and often when we're just about to give up, we may occasionally find real hope for a better future.

That's the nugget at the base of all the midwinter holidays: hope in despair, light in darkness, truth overcoming falsehood, peace amid strife.

And the stories that we tell at Christmas, and Hanukkah, and Deepavali and Solstice, can provide the grain of hope that gives us the strength to keep on until our pangs of rebirth subside, and we live again in the light of hope and truth and peace and joy.

In short, these stories and these metaphors can give us life.

Tonight, we've heard several variations of the Christmas story, each emphasizing a different aspect of the archetypal tale of hope reborn.

I will end with one last retelling, in a more contemporary setting.

"Attention, shoppers! We bring you good tidings of great joy! A baby has just been born, in the bathroom at the front of the store. If you'd like to purchase a gift for this new family, our infant supplies are in aisles 17 and 18. There is a 10% discount on diapers, if you buy a case. Thank you for shopping at Wal-Mart." At first, I didn't believe the announcement. In fact, I thought it a bit crass, and disrespectful. I heard others around me dismissing it, too—"blatant manipulation" one person said, while others just laughed it off.

But I couldn't let it go. Something inside me told me it was real—and furthermore, that this child was somehow special. Once I was checked out (I did *not* buy a case of diapers), I took a detour past the bathrooms where the birth had supposedly taken place. There was a small pile of diaper boxes, and some toys and clothes and formula, on the bench outside. A store security guard was standing watch over the whole process, and he said I could go on in—nobody was inside except the new family. He said he'd watch my cart.

I make it a point never to go into store bathrooms. The ugly walls, the feeble attempt to cheer it up with dying flowers, the grime that remained no matter how often an employee signed their initials on the "clean up" sheet on the door... it's just too depressing. This bathroom was no better, but somehow, it didn't feel as bad as I expected. The mother was lying on the floor, holding her sleeping baby, amid a nest of new fleece blankets. A man (the father?) was offering her a drink from a cup with the store's logo on it.

I excused myself for interrupting them, but they insisted it was okay. A few people had already come and gone, and each had been quite kind, they reported.

Her name was Mary, the man's name was Joe. They were still searching for a name for their new boy. They hadn't expected him quite so soon. They were on their way back to New Orleans, they said (it seemed they were eager to explain why they weren't in a hospital). They'd lost their house in the hurricane, and had lived for the past year with her cousin, Elizabeth, in Chicago. Now FEMA finally had their check ready, to replace their house and belongings, but they had to pick it up in person, in New Orleans. They didn't have enough money to pay for hotel rooms, so they'd been living in their van for the trip south. When Mary began her labor, Joe had gotten off at the very first exit, and she'd insisted on coming into the store for the delivery.

As they finished their story, three well-dressed young men came bursting into the bathroom. They were quite excited, and kept exclaiming how special this baby was, and how honored they were to attend his birth. Mary finally got them to calm down, and they explained they'd received text messages on their cellphones, explaining that an uncommon birth was happening beneath the giant smiley face at this exit. None of the three knew who had sent the text message, but they were all elated to have trusted their

instincts and gone in search of the babe. One of them bragged that he was the first to arrive, because he'd been so resourceful, and asked a police officer about the smiley face.

At this, Joe became quite agitated. He demanded to know how much the man had said. Had he mentioned the baby? The man said no, he didn't want to seem too weird; he'd told the police woman that he was searching for his girlfriend, that she'd given him that landmark. Joe relaxed, and explained that he and Mary had been roused from a roadside rest the night before. They had been trying to get a few hours of sleep, but a highway patrolman had forced them to leave. There was a four-hour maximum for parking at the rest stop. When Joe had protested, and explained about the baby, it had just made things worse. The patrolman had accused them of being Mexicans, trying to deliver a baby in the United States so their "brat" (he'd used other terms, that Joe would not repeat) would get the benefits of citizenship. They could not prove their citizenship— their papers had been lost in the flood— so the cop had threatened to arrest them, and call the INS. Mary talked him out of it, but they were still wary of the police.

The young men were strangely moved to tears by this story, and they vowed to go back out into the parking lot, and tell any police that did show up that it was all a hoax. They encouraged Mary and Joe to get the baby into the van as soon as possible, and escape.

As they left, each man knelt down beside Mary, and handed her a gift, to help raise the child. The first gave her a small collection of gold coins, each worth several hundred dollars, which they could easily trade for whatever they needed. The second gave her his Blackberry, and explained that he would continue paying for its internet and telephone service for the next 18 years. The child would have the world at his fingertips. The last man offered a plastic folder, which he said contained a paid-up health insurance policy, with a prescription benefit. Mary began to cry at this gift, and Joe fell to his knees, to embrace the man.

A few moments later, I enlisted the help of the security guard, to carry the gifts out to their van. Then I returned to carry the baby, as Joe helped Mary make her way out. She got herself situated, in their makeshift bed in the back, and I handed the baby in to her. Her face was shining with gratitude and hope, as she thanked me for all I'd done. When I protested that I'd done very little, she replied, "So many people have helped us today. So many have said that our baby is special. We will raise him to know that ALL people are special; and we'll dedicate our lives to helping others, just as we have been helped today. If you want to do something more, please go out and help somebody. Please pass this gift of love along."

And so I do. And so I tell you, now. If you want to honor this uncommon birth, and this family's miraculous message, do something good in their name. Treat the next person you meet as if she or he was a miracle, and the next person, and the next.

You are a miracle. We are all miracles. Let's treat each other as if we recognize that truth.

So may we be.

CLOSING HYMN The footsteps we follow lead to the stable. Not high in the heavens, but here on earth, is the miracle we seek: birth and rebirth from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from fear and violence to calm, and peace. In a moment, we'll sing a verse of *Silent Night*, and we'll hum several more verses as we pass the metaphorical light of peace from one candle to another, from one person to the next.

When it comes your turn to pass the flame, please remember to tip **only** the unlighted candle. Hold the lit candle straight up, and let the unlit candle tip into its fire.

Please stand as you are willing and able, and ready your candles, and let us create together a Silent, Peaceful night... {sing; lights lower; hum/ooo} {I start; light one other person's candle}

{humming & 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 anytime we want to, in the coming year.

I invite us to take one last, deep breath and revel in this glow. Internalize these flames of hope, and then *gently* blow out your candles, and hold them upright for a few more moments to let the wax cool and harden.

While that is happening, I will read our benediction in verse, taken from Maya Angelou's poem, *Amazing Peace*:

BENEDICTION IN VERSE "Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters, Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air. The world is encouraged to come away from rancor, Come the way of friendship... Hope is born again in the faces of children. It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they walk into their sunsets...

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper... We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by its presence. It is what we have hungered for. Not just the absence of war. But true Peace. A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies. Security for our beloveds and their beloveds.

We clap hands and welcome the peace of Christmas. We beckon this good season to wait awhile with us. We, Baptist and Buddhist, Methodist and Muslim, say come.

Peace. Come and fill us and our world with your majesty. We, the Jew and the Jainist, the Catholic and the Confucian, Implore you to stay awhile with us So we may learn by your shimmering light How to look beyond complexion and see community.

It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time. On this platform of peace, we can create a language To translate ourselves to ourselves and to each other...

We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and Nonbelievers, Look heavenward and speak the word aloud. Peace. We look at our world and speak the word aloud. Peace. We look at each other, then into ourselves, And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation: Peace, My Brother. Peace, My Sister. Peace, My Soul.

BENEDICTION EMBODIED I invite you to embody this peace with a gesture of namaste. "Namaste" is a Hindi word that can be translated as "the divine in me greets and honors the divine in you." It is done by holding your hands out like this, bringing them together, symbolizing the joining of opposites, and bowing slightly toward the other person.

Tonight, let us bow to the outside world, as an embodied form of "Merry Christmas to all" I invite you to set your now-cooled candles down, turn yourself, slightly, so you face a window, or just picture our wider world in your mind.

{beat} Hold your hands out...bring them together, and bow. Namaste.

BENEDICTION IN PROSE May we live lives of hope, as bright beacons to all people. Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays. So may we be.