

Imaginations of Radical Love

Reverend Sharon Dittmar
First Unitarian Church, Cincinnati
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Christmas in America languishes under a failure of imagination, a failure to name the radical drama and breadth of meaning underscoring the Christmas story. Those well versed in and familiar with the *New Testament* will tell you that the story of the birth of Jesus with angels appears only in the *Gospel of Luke*, the story of the wise men, only in *Matthew*, and *Mark* and *John* say nothing at all about the birth of baby Jesus. This is true.

Our failure of imagination though is making us irrelevant. Today's Enquirer told me that Governor Taft and the State of Ohio offer us new license plates with the words "One Nation Under God." As if a creed guaranteed good and meaningful deeds. A few pages away I noted that requests for food stamps have increased by 50% since 2001. If baby Jesus were born today his parents just might be on food stamps unable to purchase specialized license plates saying anything at all.

Our failure of imagination is making us irrelevant. I recently heard that religion and science have one quality in common, mystery, a shared love of mystery. I think they also equally embrace a love of imagination and faith. You can split hairs with me over the imagination of science and mythic story, of faith in humans or God. But if you believe the division is insurmountable I don't agree. And tonight I do not care to appease you. Our failure of imagination is making us irrelevant.

The followers of Jesus did not suffer from a lack of imagination, which was their key to survival. They looked around, saw their leader dead, and reflected on what made him special. Then they wove what was special with myths they knew and the story of Jesus, of hope, fear, life, death, prophecy and salvation was born. Marvelous. It was the survival of hope in hopeless times. It was the survival of life in a death filled world. It was the resurrection of the poor and forgotten in an exclusive and powerful land.

So of course, mention the star. A star is a fixed point of mystery, infinity (to us), a distant vision, a sign of greatness, a beauty of the firmaments. Mention a star. And please, there should be shepherds. Their health is poor, their vocation cold, their life expectancies short. Yes, add the shepherds. There are so many shepherds in the world. Let them be first, let them see the miracle first, for once. And we can't forget wise men, dubiously wise, but royal and magical, portending future greatness.

And the baby, make him helpless, and adrift, born unattended in a barn like so many beautiful children in the world. Make his parents humble, and faithful to the possibility of miracles and the survival of their family and one another. Oh, and after his birth, there will be heavenly peace because life, mysteriously and miraculously, has reconstituted itself. Yes, this is the story of my life and your life, our lives. And our imagination will guide us with hope through a hard, confusing, unpredictable world.

I love this baby Jesus, the little one in the barnyard stable. Baby Jesus is Amahl, from *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, which our choir performed just two weeks ago. As you remember, the wise men come to the house of the impoverished Amahl and his widowed mother while on their journey to find Jesus. The dubious not-so-wise men search for “a child the color of wheat, the color of dawn,” . . . a child with hands “of a King” for “as a King he was born,” . . . a child “the color of earth, the color of thorn. His eyes are sad, his hands are those of the poor, as poor he was born.” Only Amahl’s mother can see that they speak of her child. “He’s my child,” she says, “My son, my darling, my own.”

Perhaps it is Amahl’s disability that blinds the wise men. Or perhaps it is his poverty. Or perhaps, they too suffer a failure of imagination, which is a failure of love and a love of this life that is killing in this world. Only Amahl’s mother sees the beauty of her child. She has the imagination to find beauty and love in small faces and unexpected places. This is the Christmas story.

Say what you will. I really don’t care about intelligent design. Nor do I care about seasonal greetings, creationism, or going to hell. Where has our imagination gone? What I care about is an imagination wide enough to embrace love for an earth made fair and all her people one.

Which is not to say we need be all alike. The gospels tell us that Jesus had a perplexing habit of collecting unusual people, gentiles, prostitutes, tax collectors, fishermen, even a Roman official named Saul, who would change his name to Paul and rock the world, people who were sick, people who didn’t keep kosher, people who sinned. Jesus cherished and loved them regardless of language, gender, age, faith, or health.

Our failure of imagination has reduced the power of this Christmas story – that a helpless baby was ever born, a baby of love into love amidst fear and poverty. Given the statistics and evening news you would think that “life” would consider the odds and give up on us. But life is mysterious and beautiful and resilient and it grows regardless of our ignorance and lack of imagination, our poverty of radical love.

It is our failure of imagination that prohibits us from seeing we are brothers and sisters. Several years ago I saw a boy leaving the mosque on Clifton Avenue. It was a beautiful sunny day and he was dressed in white. Being a boy he did not leave the mosque with practiced steps, no he ran, with the joy of childhood on a beautiful spring day. As he ran, this robes streamed out behind him. An amazing image of flying white, spring green, sun, and the mosque set back from a Cincinnati sidewalk. And on this day I knew I was an American and I was proud to be an American, where this beautiful child, the color of wheat, the color of dawn, the color of earth, the color of thorn, could happily and safely run in the fullness of himself.

And so, on this evening of miracle and imagination, I believe your child is as precious as my child forever, I believe we are sisters and brothers forever, I believe that religion and science are cousins laughing at our human ignorance forever, I believe that fundamentalism limits the life and love of the God I know forever, I believe that the Christmas story is told in deeds not creeds, I believe that suffering and hate are real and that hope and love are stronger forever. And I believe that all these things live now and forever

No peace lies in the future, which is not hidden in this present instant.

Take peace.

The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet without reach, is joy.

Take joy.

And so, at this Christmas time, I greet you,

With the prayer that for you, now and forever,

The day breaks and the shadows flee.

Tomorrow is another dawn. No matter your stories, your fear, your problems, bend toward hope. There is life within and without. In this world you are my child, my son, my darling, my own. Forget the failed imagination of others. Choose life. Choose the miracle of the Christmas story. Choose imagination, and for the sake of this fragile world, and our many brothers and sisters, choose radical love.