

Before tonight, the closest I ever came to a Christmas Eve service was driving by a church on my way to a Chinese dinner and a movie. For many Jews, that is our Christmas Eve ritual. It is thus with a great sense of honor and privilege that I stand at this historic pulpit.

When Reverend Dittmar first asked me to preach the Christmas Eve Sermon at First Church, I thought she was pulling my leg. Actually, over the years, I have told her all about my pent up Christmas Eve sermons. I don't know if it's just an occupational hazard, but every time I think about a holiday, Jewish or non-Jewish, I begin to craft a sermon in my head.

Maybe it all started when I first saw Cary Grant in the Christmas movie *The Bishop's Wife*. Grant played an angel who came to earth to help a harassed bishop, played by David Niven, who was trying to raise money to build a new cathedral. In the final act before the angel disappeared and was removed from everyone's memory, he rewrote the bishop's Christmas Eve Sermon. I still remember the bishop as he read the sermon realizing that it wasn't the one he wrote, but not knowing where it came from. I suppose it was at that moment that I wanted to become a ghost writer for a Christmas Eve sermon.

But tonight, I'm not ghost writing or haranguing my non-Jewish colleagues with the sermon I would give. I'm giving it! As I considered Reverend Dittmar's invitation, I realized that there would be detractors, those who claim that issuing an invitation to a rabbi to preach on Christmas Eve was wrong, and there would surely be Jews who would speak ill of what I'm doing right now. But your minister took a bold step to bridge the gap that so often divides people. Although we frequently speak of this season as one of goodwill among people, regrettably this can be a season that in fact highlights divisions.

Too often today religious differences have become more important than our similarities. There are those who claim that only their particular religious perspective is true, and thus all others are false. Those who identify with no religion are often accused of being the source of disharmony and problems in our nation. People of good will and strong morals are not determined by the label that they apply to themselves but rather the actions that they take. We may celebrate different holidays, we may include different stories in our people's histories, but we are bound together by our common understanding that the human mind and heart, while fallible, ultimately determine the future, ultimately decide our fate upon this earth.

I am here in hope of bridging any divide that might separate us. I believe that we must see the world from each other's perspectives. We don't have the luxury within a world which grows smaller each day to imagine ourselves as islands. To see the world from a different perspective is not easy, yet when we move beyond our self-imposed limits, the safe boundaries that we have created for ourselves, we can begin to build upon our differences to make a healthier and more just society.

So what can a rabbi say on Christmas Eve? That is the question that members of Congregation Beth Adam asked when they heard I was going to be here. It is a question I have wrestled with since Reverend Dittmar issued me her invitation. Since

that day, I've considered the Christmas story and what it can say to me, to see what lessons I might draw from it that is respectful of its origins and to my experience.

Looking to see what brings us together, I find in the stories that serve as the foundation of Hanukkah and Christmas a core similarity that speaks to me from across the generations. Before we explore the similarity, however, it is important that I speak about how I approach Biblical texts, whether a story is founded in the Hebrew Bible or in the New Testament. As a rabbi trained in the methods of modern biblical scholarship, I read the stories of the ancients not as a single historical narrative that describe events as they actually happened, but rather as texts written by human authors who were wrestling with the issues of their day. These ancient documents are composite works that interweave history, legend, law, myth, political struggles, allegory, ancient rules to live by, even religious conflict. Accepting that the ancient texts are human and not divine allows us to understand the age, the context, and the people who composed them. Looking at the text in this way also frees us from having to justify or be bound by the ancients' misjudgments.

I know from teaching with Reverend Dittmar that a scholarly approach to texts is one that is celebrated at First Unitarian Church. You also see the stories of the ancients as great tales that taught important lessons, even when the events described are often more fiction than fact.

When we encounter these tales in this way, we read the stories to see what insights we may gain, knowing that religious stories continue to be created in each and every generation. No age has a hold on all truth or all wisdom – ethical or moral. No one generation knows the secrets of the universe. We know that we too will someday be ancestors, that generations after us will look to our words and actions. They may see at times our greatness but also where we have fallen short. History is a dance between one generation and the next, never fixed for all time, ever changing, growing, evolving into something better than what had existed before.

Tonight is Christmas Eve. Although Hanukkah this year has been over for many nights now, looking at the Hanukkah story starts us on our journey.

We start with the story of oil, a vessel of oil that was to last one day but lasted eight. Let me say clearly that this is a myth, a complete fantasy so obviously created by the rabbis of a later generation that we can date when the story came into existence. The rabbis propagated this tale for a reason. The story of Hanukkah had already been written down in the Book of Maccabees, but the rabbis weren't satisfied. That story didn't meet with their approval or their needs. So the rabbis turned a very human event, a story about a military victory, into something it wasn't -- a tale about a miracle.

By doing so, they tried to eliminate a value that is essential to the Jewish experience, a value that has continued to raise itself up throughout Jewish history, that the future rests upon us. The future is dependent upon the actions of people based on our sense of right and wrong, our willingness to act, to stand up against injustice, to comfort the sick, and to clothe the naked. The world is transformed through human action.

Thus when the great rabbi Hillel was asked to encapsulate the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot, he didn't speak of belief, nor of what will happen when we die. He simply said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. All the rest is commentary."

When I consider the story of the birth of Jesus and know that there have been thousands of different interpretations over the generations (and that a rabbi speaking about this powerful tale on Christmas Eve treads on sacred ground), I read the story as a message about being human and the power that lies within us to transform the world.

As those who read the ancient texts as metaphor, it is incumbent upon us to ask what may seem to some a heretical question but seems to me the obvious one. Why did those authoring the story decide to describe Jesus and all he was to represent in human terms? The authors could have described the messiah as an angel or some other celestial being not yet known to humankind. The messiah, like the God of the Bible, may have never been seen, but only revealed through word or sign. The authors of this story made a decision to cast the messiah as human. Theirs was a conscious act – deliberate, determined. I draw from this a powerful message, one often ignored and overshadowed by the discussion of the divinity of Jesus. The message which I draw is that the future of humans lies not in the hands of the gods but rather in the hands of people.

The authors of this tale further created a powerful and disturbing image with contrasts that are sharp and clear. The story begins with a pregnant woman and her caring husband looking for a place for her to give birth, but there is no room, no place for this outcast family. This is a strong image. We can all imagine what it would be like to need a place to rest, to lie down, exhausted, and yet to find all the doors that we knock upon are closed to us.

Surely, the authors of this myth, this tale passed from old, could have spoken of their finding a glorious spot for the child to have been born, a place rich in beauty and comfort. If a miracle in the sky could signal the birth of this child, than certainly a miracle could have occurred so that this outcast family could have given birth to this child in a more appropriate place than a manger.

Thus we must ask: Why the manger? Why a place for animals, an unworthy place for any person to be born, rich or poor, leader or follower? To me it suggests that the authors of that tale understood, as we do today, that there exists in society a divide between those who have and those who have not. In every age there are those more fortunate and those less so, those who live on the edge of despair, those who do not know where their next meal is coming from, those who are not even certain that they will have a roof over their heads when the winds of winter blow, a place to reside even when they are to give birth.

And then, to capture all the hopes and dreams and the possibilities for the future, they chose not a god or titan or angel, but they picked the image of the infant, the most vulnerable person in our society, totally dependent, helpless, who looks to adults for food and safety. With any baby, there are unknown possibilities, unknown recognized potential, unimagined greatness. When we see an infant for the first time, no one can predict the child's future. While we may know that children born to poverty and hardship

have a difficult life ahead, we hope that perhaps they can break the cycle. The newborn, the infant, represents the hopes, the dreams, the potential that exists within one human life, to transform all that he or she encounters.

It strikes me that both Hanukkah and Christmas declare in the bleakness of winter that hope is found not in the farthest reaches of heaven, but rather in the compassion of the human heart, the durability of the human spirit, and the wisdom and insights of the human mind. The hope for the future lies within people, young or old, who may celebrate one holiday or another, born in luxury or on the edge of poverty. The message passed from generations, but often ignored because it places great responsibility upon each of us, is that the hope for the future lies within the community of people.

To emphasize this message, the lighting of fires, be it candles for Hanukkah or the lights of Christmas, has become our symbol. Our ancestors who pre-date any of the religious traditions of which we speak tonight used their minds to tame fire and raise us up from the status of other animals. With fire as our tool we warmed ourselves, cooked our food, and brought light to the darkness. Fire is not only a tool, but a symbol of our human ability to reason, to think, to transform the world around us to meet our needs.

And so we live within a delicate balance. We hold in our hands fire with its awesome power to destroy and to wreak havoc. But with this fire, we also have our ability to tame destructive forces and use them to improve the world in which we live, not only for us, but for people everywhere.

At this time of year we are called to live up to our human potential to transform a world wrapped in darkness to one made better by the light. Let us and all who value justice and peace accept the responsibility that rests upon us. The hope of the future lies in our hands and in the hands of those who recognize that by working together, celebrating our similarities rather than arguing about our differences, we, like our ancestors can bring light where there has been only darkness.

As we pass the flame of the candle to one another, may we be keenly aware that we pass among us more than fire. We pass among us our symbol of hope. Through the fire of passion for justice and equality that burns in our hearts and souls, we can dispel the darkness of ignorance, the shadow of despair, the gloom of poverty, the night of violence.

The flame that we pass reminds us that in a place where there is no humanity, we can strive to be human. On this night when we gather together as a community and as friends, let us renew our commitment to push back the darkness so that the light of hope and reason shine ever brighter.

And let me wish each of you a very Merry Christmas.