



Rumplestiltskin: the Advent Story

Rev. Annie Foerster
First Unitarian Church
536 Linton Street
Cincinnati, Ohio 45219
November 29, 2009

His name was given partly in honor and partly in error. Neither impressed the other children. I can hear them now – his peers – taunting him with his name in their high, nasal voices, repeating over and over until it is both nonsense and ridicule: “Wrinkled pants and skinny legs, Wrinkled pants and skinny legs,” they call. “Rumple- stiltskin.”

He had been named for his great, great grandfather, who had been a tall, tall man with a deep, deep voice. “Rumbler,” they had called him for his gravelly baritone; and “Stilt-Shins” for his long lower limbs. “Rumbler Stilt-Shins” In his language it was an honor. But when the great grandson emigrated and tried to translate the name into the new land’s tongue, it became a curse for his son. That was the error. Rumplestiltskin. *Wrinkled pants and skinny legs.*

The situation was not without irony. The boy who was given this tall, burdensome name as his family heritage was born a dwarf. Skinny legs they called him, after the long legs of his ancestor, but his were short and stubby. His voice was no rumble either. Even into adulthood he retained the lilt and pitch of a child. It was well that that part of the name hadn’t survived translation.

What must the sensitive child have suffered – for aren’t all children sensitive? What must the sensitive child have endured for his name and for his maladies? It is certain knowledge that he disdained his contemporaries. As a child he was aloof. Who could blame him? As an adult, he was remote. He didn’t need them, didn’t need their taunts, didn’t need their companionship.

But -- more irony here – they needed him, did they but know it. Many of the desired physical aspects he lacked at his birth, but he arrived with a singular gift. His was the gift of realizing transformation. If something terrible existed, he could transform it into something

acceptable. Illness he could change to good health, fear to bravery. Himself he could not transform. But any illness of the soul or psyche, any crisis of bad planning or braggadocio, these he could alter. He was clever, but because he was not liked, or understood, cleverness looked like magic. People feared him – and envied him his gift – and they could not forgive him his deformities. So he took himself and his aptitude into the forest. He answered only the most heart-rending pleas for help, and he made it his habit to charge a painful price, in recompense, I suppose, for his own pain.

The story you've heard about the tailor and his beautiful daughter is true: the wedding records have been verified. The king of the day did indeed marry the commoner daughter of a suit maker, who was reputed have been a braggart of the first degree. The people of the area insist to this day that he did, indeed, claim that his girl-child could spin straw into gold and the king believed it because he wanted to. Thus she was locked into a room full of dried stems. She wept inconsolably. The little man came to her.

There is no witness to magic. Did he actually spin the straw and transform it into precious metal? Or did he, perhaps, pull up a large truck, sweep out the room and sprinkle about a few coins he already had in his possession? We'll never know, so why argue the point? What is more important is the real transformation that occurred after he dried the tears of the wailing daughter. What is more magical, more miraculous, more mysterious, even than the creation of precious metal from baser elements, are the changes that occurred *after* the king entered the chamber in the morning and found that his fodder had become funds.

The young commoner was transformed into a queen; the child was transformed into a wife; the virgin was transformed into a mother. Oh, these things happen every day, but they are great miracles, if we would but acknowledge them. They do not happen easily. They are the result of fearful waiting and dread anticipation.

Recall, if you have it in your memory, your waiting for the wedding day – the nervousness, the concern that something would go wrong. Remember, if you have it in your story line, the long sanding of two souls rubbing one another raw and smooth until they are transformed from rough lovers into graceful mates. And imagine, if you do not already know, the growing anticipation of birth and the miracle of creation that converts one from careless individual to proud and protective parent. If these aren't miracles, what are?

But I digress. It is the preacher's prerogative to do so, but our story is not done. There is yet the price to be paid. As I study on the life and philosophy of the little man with the big name, I am not surprised that he asks for the first-born child. Without a mate of his own – and where would he find one, living alone in the woods? – he must have had cravings for some kind of companionship, perhaps another who would not laugh at his length or his label, one that would appreciate his cleverness for what it was and not be afraid or envious. He asked the price and the queen-mother believed she must pay. She had not been brought

up to fend for herself and so, once again, she fell back on pitiful crying. And, once again, the dwarf's heart was softened.

Or possibly he saw an opportunity for another transformation. Let her suffer; let her wait; let her work on it herself. That may have been what he was thinking. "Tell me my name and you can keep the brat," he said, already steeling himself from the possible loss of the child. "Within three days, if you can guess my name, which hasn't been spoken aloud for years, I will mark your account 'paid in full.' But don't count on my services ever again, if that happens."

The first two days she sent out a messenger to seek someone who may have heard the dwarf's name spoken long ago. While the servant was gone she paced her chambers – waiting, waiting, waiting for his return. Waiting, waiting, waiting to hear the report. She held her child and wept, waiting, as any mother weeps and waits for all the days of her child's life that she cannot control. Nothing. No name.

On the third day, she could wait no more. She took the search into her own hands. Strapping the baby into her shawl, she went down to the newspaper office and asked to see the birth announcements for the past fifty years. She wasn't helpless after all; another transformation. She found the stories of his parents' shame; the stories of his being named valedictorian of his class, but not showing up for graduation; the stories of his transformations, obviously quite over-told; and the stories of his disappearance. She discovered his name – Rumplestiltskin.

The name isn't the important part of the story. It is just his name, given partly in honor and partly in error. The name isn't always the thing. Sometimes it's just a plot device. This story is about transformation: how the helpless, hapless lass became strong and self-reliant for the sake of her babe; how the waiting and worrying transformed her into a do-something momma.

The ending isn't the important part of the story, either. But just to clear up any misunderstandings, Rumplestiltskin did not stamp through the floor in anger when she told him his name. He just smiled his most ironic smile and threw up his hands as if to say, "That's life." The transformed queen-mother didn't let it end there, for she had become more wise in her tribulations. She invited the little man to visit whenever he wished. She saw to it that the child appreciated him, and she watched that appreciation blossom into affection and love over the years. She watched the child transformed into a self-sufficient adult she could be proud of. And she watched the dwarf be transformed into the loving person that dwelled in his heart and would have been his natural destiny, but for the silly name and the little legs.

That's the story of Rumpelstiltskin. Not even an original story, albeit an important one. His name might have been Buddha, or Jesus, or Quan Yin, or the name of any number of people who have been given the gift of transformation. It is a teaching story, a bit of fact, a generosity of exaggeration, a spicing of fancy, a hint of magic. It is the story of Shirley waiting for Christmas. It is the story of Elizabeth waiting into her old age for a child. It is the story of a weary world waiting for a sign or a savior. It is the story of innocence versus experience. It is, as I said, a story of transformation. It is not history. It is not sociology. It is not psychology. Mostly it is a story about the human condition, about the possibility of miracles and about the inevitability of waiting – waiting for what is good, for what is desired, for what is needed, for what will come.

We have examined the story of Rumpelstiltskin as I had promised. Let us turn now to the other stories of the advent season, the stories of the births of one who was named John the Baptist and another who was called Jesus of Nazareth.

Zechariah and Elizabeth did not call upon the services of a dwarf. They wept in the privacy of their home and they prayed. They waited agonizingly as their biological clocks ticked away. Elizabeth waited in the special embarrassment that was the lot of women in those days who did not bear children. Their prayers were heard in the soft heart of an angel named Gabriel who was the agent of their transformation. They paid the price of the gift with silence for Zechariah and with seclusion for Elizabeth.

Mary and Joseph played the waiting game as well. What child is this and whose? Where will we go? Who will know us? What is to become of us? Will the king kill our child or will the heavens preserve him? All the questions that all of us have asked, they asked. *What will happen next? What will life be about?* And there is no answer except in the waiting, and in the loss of innocence, and in the naming of the event.

But the story – the teaching story – of the birth of Jesus, has even more import than this. See it for what it was – a new story in a day and time when the old stories were quite, quite different. Barbara Rhode, in her meditation manual titled *In the Simple Morning Light* notes that “the remarkable thing about the Christmas story is the change it represents in human thought.” It is a story, not about the god of jealousy and anger, but a god “who needs a humble young woman and the long months of patient waiting and the human process of birth to bring divinity into the world.”

“Imagine,” she writes, “that after years of hearing story after story of men and women bowing abjectly before the might of kings and emperors, tsar, dictators, chieftains and tyrants, you hear a story in which three kings kneel before a tiny child – in praise of possibility.”

Possibility. Possibility is the zygote of transformation. It is the union of potential and hope. It is the long confinement of dreaming the painful birth of change. It is innocence arriving out of experience. It is *innocence that is born and experience that dies*.

Do you see what this season is all about? Do you understand what comes of all this waiting and the stress of anticipation? Do you understand the symbolism of transforming straw into gold, or of birthing babies in a pile of straw?

Do not be impatient with the old stories. They may seem trivial at times in their unchanging repetition year after year. They may seem tedious in their demands on our credulity. *A virgin birth? Who could believe it? Gold out of straw? Who could believe it? A first child in old age? Who could believe it? Visits by dwarves and angels? Gifts from kings? Stars that beckon? Who could believe any of it?*

Believe it, my friends. Believe it in innocence, for innocence is full of what *might* be when experience is used up and empty. Believe it in anticipation, when waiting is hard and you need something to hold on to. Believe it in laughter and in tears, for stories are the repositories of our joys and sorrows and *all* of them are true, even the made-up ones.

Believe in this season of advent. In the waiting will be born your tomorrows, and your transformations. Believe that you must pay a terrible price for such a gift – pay with fear of unknowing, pay with pain of letting go of the past, pay with praise and thanksgiving. Believe it and make reparation the only way you can: by living your life well.

And while you wait, remember that this day is the day you waited for yesterday. This is the day that has come to you, newborn and innocent with possibility. Take this day and *go to the school of life. Go and learn how to unlearn*. Speak out the name of whatever angel blesses you. Shout out the name of the dwarf who mocks you. Name the fears and name the blessings. And wait for tomorrow with all your heart.