

“What Are We Waiting For?”

Rob Eller-Isaacs

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A couple of weeks ago, while attending a Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Ministers up in Ottawa, I found myself walking to dinner at twilight. Beside me, his breath visible in the chilly air walked a beloved colleague, a young man for whom I have great and growing respect. “I have to find a story for Christmas Eve,” he said to me. I paused, bemused and then inquired, “What’s wrong with the story everyone already knows?”

It wasn’t kind of me. I knew exactly what he meant. God knows I’ve experienced the foolishness of attempting to address the Christmas longing by finding some new angle from which to approach it. It’s like that moment in “Love Actually” when the eight year old announces to her mother that she’s been cast in the Christmas pageant and that she’s going to play the first lobster. Her mother, played by the distinguished, Emma Thompson declares, “I didn’t know there was one

lobster in the nativity scene let alone two.” “Duh,” her well-informed daughter replies. I, for one, am grateful to serve a congregation that knows there was no lobster at the cradle and more importantly is clear that Christmas is not the best time of year for innovation of any kind. There is, in fact, no better Christmas story than the story that everyone already knows.

The fourteenth verse of the seventh chapter of the First Book of the Prophet Isaiah provides the first of many instances Christians find in the Hebrew Scriptures foreshadowing the life of Jesus. *“Therefore the Lord shall give you a sign: A young woman is with child, and she will bear a son, and will call him Immanuel.”* The Cambridge commentary points out that the Hebrew word translated here as “young woman” “does not preclude the meaning of “Virgin” that appears in the Authorized Version, but that “usage would hardly suggest it. In any case, (the commentary continues) the young woman is not the sign; that is the (fact that) the son is about to be born and given the significant name, Immanuel, God is with us.”

The concept of incarnation, the notion of an indwelling God, is as old as human consciousness. As early as the late Paleolithic period images begin to appear on cave walls depicting human beings in animal forms. The most familiar is the image of “the Great Sorcerer” found in the Trois Frères cave. It pictures a man, possibly a shaman, wearing the head of a deer crowned with huge antlers. One can’t help but interpret such depictions as positing that the Divine can incorporate itself within us conferring special powers and particular obligations. Rooted in the dawn of history, theologies of incarnation flow through every religious tradition. Every narrative includes a “wonder child” be it Krishna, the Buddha, Osiris, Athena, or Jesus each is in his or her own context an embodiment of the Divine. Some say that the universality of the archetype disproves the particular. They deny the divinity of Jesus asserting that, in effect; they can’t possibly all be Divine so none of them can be Divine. Unless, of course, each and all of them and yes, each and all of us are, in truth, embodiments of the Divine ourselves.

Ram Dass writes in Remember Be Here Now, a seminal work of the new spiritual awakening first published in 1971:

I have a relative who is in a mental hospital. He thinks he is Christ. Well, that's groovy, I am Christ also. But he doesn't think I am Christ. He thinks he is Christ because it happened to him and he took his ego with him. So he says, "I'm special", and when I say to him: Sure man, you're Christ and I'm Christ too, He says, "You don't understand." And when he's out he steals cars and things like that because he needs them because he's Christ and that's all right. So they lock him up. He says: "I don't know, me, I'm a responsible member of society. I go to church. Me, they put in a mental hospital. You're free. You've got a beard. You wear a dress. (Why don't they lock you up?)" (I tell him) Because as far as I'm concerned we are all God. That's the difference. If you really think another guy is God he doesn't lock you up.

Theologies of incarnation fall into two basic expressions. The first is the tragic view which interprets the descent of the Divine into human form as a fall from grace, an imprisonment or

enslavement of the spirit. This approach leads inevitably to a radical split between the body and soul. It fosters a focus on an eternal afterlife a deflection of consciousness which ultimately can cause us to deny the reality of the natural world. That same denial encourages environmental degradation and, at its worst, becomes a theological excuse for human violence. One's rewards after all are in heaven.

But there is a second and far more life affirming theology of incarnation. In this worldview the Divine takes bodily form to celebrate and sanctify the material world. All of Nature becomes thereby divine, and this one life we have to live, becomes the greatest gift of all. Religious history can be seen as a persistent struggle between these two views of incarnation. We stand squarely in the second understanding. We reject the insistence on human depravity and original sin in favor of an abiding affirmation of our humanness and a firm belief in original blessing.

We don't need a new story for Christmas. What we need is to come to understand the old story in new ways. Our faith grows

out of the Renaissance. Liberal religion came into its own in close relationship to the rise of the universities. We have always had a special bond with the sciences. It's no accident that the great experimental chemist, Joseph Priestly made his living as a Unitarian minister. Nor is it surprising that Charles Darwin himself was a devout and a devoted Unitarian. It is understandable that many of those for whom the natural world itself is sacred are drawn in many ways to our way of being religious.

But just as the religious impulse can too easily degrade into a shallow imitation of itself so liberalism tends to misuse science to defend against the terrifying prospect that real religion demands that we change our lives. If Jesus is just one more myth among many then you and I can disregard his teachings and move on with our insular, self-satisfied lives. To understand incarnation, to comprehend Immanuel, to awaken to the fact that God will soon be with us asks far more of us than we imagine we can possibly provide.

This sanctification of the world has implications not only for our personal spiritual lives but also for the life we share. It asks that we consider and lend our strength to a whole new way of life. It calls us to live into what Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel calls a “new politics for the common good.”

I want to quote at length from a speech delivered on March 18th, 1968 at the University of Kansas by Robert F. Kennedy who was at the time the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination for President. Sandel puts the speech in context.

“Kennedy spoke of the war in Vietnam, riots in America’s cities, racial inequality, and the crushing poverty he had witnessed in Mississippi and Appalachia. He then turned from these explicit matters of justice to argue that Americans had come to value the wrong things.” Kennedy said:

Our Gross National Product now is over 800 billion dollars a year. But that Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for people who break them. It counts the destruction of the

redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts...the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet the Gross National Product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud to be Americans.

Bobby was speaking of the need for a new bottom line.

Americans are not the only ones in need of such we're just the most conspicuous example. Our theology of incarnation goes well beyond the precious personal spirituality of the season. . . Our enlightened world-view easily sees and celebrates the

universal. As Linus once said “I love humanity, its people I can’t stand.” Like Linus we religious liberals are far more at ease with the universal than we are with the particular. We enjoy being advocates far more than actually being with neighbors in need. And we have some growing to do.

Sandel calls for four possible themes which might help provide a framework for a new politics of the common good. He first suggests we pay attention to citizenship, sacrifice and service. He calls us to rebuild the gathering places and create new opportunities where as he puts it “young people from different economic classes, religious backgrounds and ethnic communities can come together in common institutions.

The second of his four framing concepts is that we limit the expansion of market-oriented reasoning by establishing a new and very different bottom line. He asks us to consider and then to determine the attributes of human happiness, to know what we mean when we talk about, “the good life,” and then to pursue it.

The third is that we pay close attention to inequality, solidarity and civic virtue and the fourth and perhaps the most important is that we give up the notion that the public square ought to be morally neutral. It isn't and it never has been. Liberals have simply withdrawn from the fray leaving the field to right wing ideologues and religious fundamentalists.

No less an authority than Barack Obama put it this way:
“Each day, it seems, thousands of Americans are going about their daily rounds-dropping off the kids at school, driving to the office, flying to a business meeting, shopping at the mall, trying to stay on their diets-and they’re coming to realize that something is missing. They are deciding that their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer busyness, is not enough. They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives. If we truly hope to speak to people where they’re at-to communicate our hopes and values in a way that’s relevant to their own-then as progressives, we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse.”

No...we don't need a new story. We need to embrace and understand the old strong story in new ways. We need to try it on and live it out and risk our very lives in light of the love for which we're waiting. Amen