

## Christmas Eve 2011

preached by Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland,  
December 24, 2011

As I prepared tonight's Christmas Eve service I thought about a homily that the great social justice minister William Sloane Coffin gave at New York's Riverside Church back in 1986. In his homily, Coffin reflected upon the character of the innkeeper in the Nativity story. He suggests that the innkeeper could have given the pregnant Mary his own room to give birth in instead of turning her and Joseph out into the stable. Coffin's generous in that he says of the innkeeper, "I picture him as less mean than hassled by all the guests in the inn and exhausted by the time Joseph's knocking woke him up in the middle of the night." But Coffin also suggests that in being too busy the innkeeper missed out on something important. And so Coffin asks the question, "Did [the innkeeper] ever find out that the Messiah long awaited by devout Jews had come to him personally, and he been too busy to even recognize him?"

We Unitarian Universalists do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah but Coffin's question remains a good one. It is, put slightly differently, what blessings do we miss because we are too busy to pay attention to what is actually going on? Christmas Eve is an appropriate time to reflect on this question. Preparations for the holiday can have us rushing from errand to errand without ever pausing to catch our breath. Sometimes, I get wrapped up in my holiday check list and focus on accomplishing tasks rather than enjoying the present moment.

But the present moment is the only one we have. Right now is all there is. Whatever our holiday lists include tonight in this hour Christmas Eve is this service with readings, poinsettias, candle light and lovely music. That makes it an appropriate time to ask: If we pause amid the busyness of our lives what blessings will we discover? We will notice the long soft cast of the candles against red leaves? The whistle of the wind? The beauty of our neighbor's faces?

Another way of looking at these questions is to recast them as this: Do we believe that what people variably call heaven, the Kingdom of God, the sacred or the holy is found in the present world we inhabit? Or is it to be discovered in some distant future?

For more than two thousand years people have debated how Jesus himself would have answered these questions. The majority of Christians believe that Jesus pointed the way to some future eschaton. They argue that when he spoke of the Kingdom of God he referred to something that was yet to come. They believe that after some cataclysmic series of events the world will be turned upside down and empire and tyranny brought to an end.

A minority have dissented and suggested that when Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God he was not speaking of a distant event. He was speaking of the here and now. The phrase, "the Kingdom of God is within you" referred to the moment of connection and transformation that happens when we open ourselves up to the present.

Being present with the present can be a challenge. It was Henry David Thoreau who said, "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation..." While I am not certain that Thoreau's words ring quite true, it is true that there moments in our lives that are filled with pain and ugliness. One reason why some

people claim that Jesus looked towards the Kingdom of God is that during his lifetime many people's lives were, in the words of Thomas Hobbes, "poor, nasty, brutish and short."

Despite this observation, I would argue that the sort of empathy necessary to solve human problems is only available to us in the present moment. When we are present with the present, whether a child's joy or the pain of another, then we can open ourselves up to making their experience part of our own. And that can be a powerfully motivating force to act to make the world better. And it can also open us up to unexpected blessings.

On Christmas Eve I like to think that Santa Claus is one of the symbols of such unexpected blessings. Most adults and older children do not believe in Santa but I can assure you he is real enough. I once saw him on vacation in Mexico. Or, more accurately, I saw a busload of Santas on vacation together in Mexico. In their sunglasses, white beards, red suspenders and red Christmas themed shorts they were on a tour of one of Mexico's ancient pyramids.

In the swelter of July that bus of Santas reminded me that I can never be too sure when or where the blessings of the holiday will appear. And it's only by being present with the present--and not lost in the busyness or tilted to the future--that I can be aware of them when they come. This Christmas let's not be like the innkeeper and miss the blessings around us. Instead let's revel in what is and enjoy the company of each to each and the wonderful music of the choir that we're about to hear.

Merry Christmas!