

Inside the Story
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

“Annunciation to the Shepherds” by Lynn Ungar

It’s hard not to laugh.
What a picture it makes –
the dumbfounded shepherds
and the stricken sheep,
the cacophony of bleating
and the barking of sheepdogs
dashing and nipping
in a vain attempt at order,
and over it all the angels
trying to make their
shimmery voices heard.
“A who? Wrapped in what?”
the shepherds holler back.
“*Where* are we supposed to go?”
Poor guys. They wanted directions,
a purpose, some sense of how
the story might end.
And all they got,
all any of us ever get,
was the sound of angels,
somewhere beyond the din,
singing “Glory, Hosanna”
across the improbable night.

“Each of Us” by Ann Fields

As we hear the familiar Christmas story... let us open our hearts to the images
which speak to our lives.
Each of us could travel a long and weary journey, only to find that when night falls
there is no room at the inn.
Each of us could be a shepherd, patiently caring for those who need us, who depend
on us.
Each of us could be a king or a queen, in search of the holy, ready to offer our gifts.
Each of us might sometime hear angel voices, singing of a glory we have yet to
know.
And surely, for each of us, there is a desert to cross, a star to follow, and a new
being within to bring to life.

Sermon

My grandmother died when I was a boy of about 11 or 12. Grandma had traveled out to St. Louis to visit family she hadn't seen in years. While there she began showing signs of a heart attack. My father – her son, a physician – flew out to be by her side in the hospital. Upon his return Dad told us that from her hospital bed, knowing her life was nearing its end, Grandma wondered what we boys (my two brothers and I) would do.

For the story of her life was coming to an end as the story of our lives was just beginning. And she was curious, naturally enough, even though realizing she would never see for herself as we grew into whomever it was we would become.

Decades later, when my father was living through his dying days, like his mother all those years earlier he wondered how the lives of his grandchildren would turn out.

This is, after all, how the wheel of life turns, and turns again: Beginnings, middles, and endings of our varied stories all woven together.

Billy Collins has a poignantly delightful poem he titled “Aristotle” – alluding to the philosopher’s writing on the nature of drama. The poem is too long to read in its entirety. But it begins:

This is the beginning.
Almost anything can happen.
This is where you find
the creation of light, a fish wriggling onto land,
the first word of *Paradise Lost* on an empty page...
This is the first part
where the wheels begin to turn...

Then the second stanza includes this:

This is the middle.
Things have had time to get complicated,
messy, really. Nothing is simple anymore...

He goes on to elaborate all the ways that our lives or a drama, an opera, a book, get complicated. Then the final stanza includes these lines:

And this is the end,
the car running out of road,
the river losing its name in an ocean...
the empty wheelchair...
This is the end, according to Aristotle,
what we have all been waiting for,
what everything comes down to...

But here’s the thing. The middle is always going on, though we may at the same time be marking apparent beginnings and endings.

After all, we are born, our individual beginning, into the middles of millions of others’ stories quite well underway; and when we die we leave behind the middles of millions of others. In other words, we will never see or experience how things all turn out, “what everything comes down to.”

And we certainly can't know ahead of time how things will go. After all, we live inside the story. Can't read ahead to the end of the novel or skip the first act to get to the end of the last act.

On Christmas Eve, we will hear once again the nativity story from the Gospel of Luke. We already know how this story of that baby's life will go right to the last chapter and verse – not to mention the ripples for centuries beyond his death.

But if we take the story seriously (which is not to say literally) the shepherds didn't know any of that – nor did Mary and Joseph, nor did the three wise men in Matthew's telling of the tale... none of them with any "sense of how the story might end."

And in fact, whether history or legend, the story becomes more powerful if we allow ourselves to enter in, to get inside the story as much as possible. This is why I find the Christmas Pageant so moving as we present it here at Old Ship – with folks (all ages) invited to be a shepherd or an angel or a star or a wise one, in other words really to enter in:

So you carry a shepherd's crook, wear a wise one's crown or an angel's halo; perhaps imagine what it was like for the innkeeper or what it was like for Mary to have her baby far from home, in a stable of all places. You are invited to enter in to the story, maybe discovering something fresh about your own story as you do – as the second reading suggested.

For example, have you ever had the experience of metaphorically (maybe literally) finding there is no room at the inn? Not being welcome, not invited, seen as "other" for whatever reason – and this perhaps while everyone around you seems to be quite welcome?

Are some of you right now something like shepherds tending their sheep, as you find yourselves deeply in the midst of caring for a dear friend or family member... a task sometimes filled with worries, even fears?

Or maybe, like the wise ones, you've been seeking the holy, seeking meaning, and sometimes crossing a desert, dry place, on your way, not at all certain where the journey ends – or if it will end. And maybe others in this money-based, success-obsessed culture not understanding your quest.

So, yes, entering into the age-old nativity stories may help us get inside the meanings of our own individual stories, journeys, struggles... maybe including feelings and emotions we might have during the "holiday season" – the fear of the shepherds, the worry of the parents, the discouragement of finding no room at the inn – which have little to do with the joy of the angels singing that we are all somehow supposed to feel.

A healthy exercise, getting inside this old story – because none of our stories are all joy... and maybe that's not all bad

The teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, in a commentary to a Buddhist text, outlines "Eleven Guides for Daily Living." And one way or another each "guide" encourages us not to wish for no trouble, no obstacles, no challenges, no difficult relationships. Why not? Because, he reminds us (if we need reminding), that it is as we live through our troubles and challenges that we learn and grow, that we shed layers of ego and self-righteousness, that we deepen our compassion and our commitment to helping others who have also worried, feared, and faced daunting challenges.

Troubles and challenges and obstacles? Well, that's Aristotle's and Billy Collins' middle of the story after all, isn't it, where most of the action takes place, where things have gotten quite complicated indeed – as Collins writes in some of what I did not quote

earlier, the middle where “teeming with people at cross purposes,” where “Disappointment unshoulders his knapsack...” “the sticky part where the plot congeals...” where “Here the aria rises to a pitch, a song of betrayal, salted with revenge,” and so on.

Okay then, when we are in the middle of the story, faced with the obstacles and challenges, experiencing some share of suffering and defeat along with, we hope, some ease and success... all of it mixed together... not knowing how it will all turn out, no more than the shepherds did, what do we know?

Well, we know is how it *feels* in the middle. And we know we must decide from our limited perspective what our next line or next deed in the play of life might best be, striving to bring to that line or deed as much compassion, beauty, and maybe even some wisdom. Humanly enough we hope for things to go well, we aim for a good end or at least next chapter, but humbly realize we can't *know* how things will go. It is, in other words, a sort of leap of faith from inside the story, which means in the midst (or middle) of lots of uncertainty.

Maybe this brings us to the most important lesson of all from the perspective inside the story. Play our part as best we can and then, leap of faith, let go of how it might play out. Can't control the outcome... *and* we will never know how everything turns out... because actually everything just goes on – not just three acts or five.

For, again, we are born into not just our own story, but into all sorts of stories – millions of them! – already in progress; and when we leave the stage we will be leaving behind all sorts of stories (from the personal to the political and global) still in the middle or just beginning. On the wheel turns.

Can we come to terms with this?

Knowing that only some things “turn out,” never everything.

Had my grandmother come to terms with this? My father?

Can we come to terms with how the end of one story becomes the beginning of another, how all the stories are mixed together, never turning out once and for all, as in a play following Aristotle's outline.

Can we come to terms with this?

Well, maybe not so easily as an abstract philosophical proposition. Maybe only if we allow ourselves to get fully inside our story, fully present to each moment of it, but letting go of thinking we *are* the story, letting go of the many ways we identify ourselves and that others identify us. Just present to this moment and the next, and to what seems the right thing to do or say next, and then next.

For at a fundamental level, though we are of course inside the story of our lives, we are at the same time more than only the story. We are, as I sometimes say, individual manifestations of the whole, of cosmos, of the divine (choose your metaphor)... which means of love.

Maybe, then, our task one way or another, this season and always, is in whatever way is our way to make of our lives a manger for love... love inside all the stories and transcending all the stories... love, passed from grandmother to her son and to his, love the angels' song of all the stories... love, may it always be our song.

So may it be.