

Jesus and the Christmas Magician

Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
December 12, 2021

Story for All Ages: “The Christmas Magician” by Ken Read-Brown

Alex loved Christmas: Loved everything about Christmas – decorating the Christmas tree, hanging the stockings, opening presents... everything. Alex looked forward to Christmas for months.

Well, one year it seemed to Alex that time was moving more slowly than ever as Christmas neared. Days felt like years. The clock barely seemed to move.

Then, one night Alex lay in bed wishing that it was already Christmas Eve and that the next day would magically be Christmas. Alex began falling asleep whispering, “I wish it was Christmas... I wish it was Christmas... I wish it was Christmas...” And just then... POOF!!! BANG!!!

Alex sat up in bed like a shot... for there at the foot of the bed was a cloud of smoke, and as the smoke began to clear, standing there was the oddest-looking man, wearing a strange tall hat, with wild hair coming out from under the hat... and he was holding what looked like a slightly crooked magic wand. The strange man looked a little confused...

“Who are you?!” asked Alex.

“Why, I am the Christmas Magician of course!” said the odd-looking man. He opened his cape with a flourish, and tiny stars and moons and suns went flying across the room!

“What... or who... is the Christmas Magician?” asked Alex. “I’ve never heard of a Christmas Magician.”

“What?! You’ve never heard of the Christmas Magician?! I thought every little boy and girl had heard of the Christmas Magician.”

“Well... I haven’t. Just what is it that you do?”

“Ahhh...” said the Magician, “I come whenever a child calls for me.”

“But I didn’t call for you...”

“Oh, but yes you did. You were wishing that Christmas would come. I heard you! And you said it three times! That’s how children call me. Because... *I can make Christmas come!!*” A big, dreamy smile crossed the face of the Christmas Magician.

“Oh boy! Okay, make Christmas come, o Christmas Magician! Make Christmas come!” Alex was so excited!

The Christmas Magician looked very happy when Alex said this. He gathered himself up taller than he had been. He puffed up his chest. He began to wave his wand this way and that way. He began to chant... “Abracadabra, ali kazam... let it be Christmas as fast as...”

“Wait!!” Alex cried out.

“What? Why?” asked the surprised looking, suddenly a little smaller looking Christmas Magician.

“Well,” said Alex, “if Christmas were to come right away, then that would mean I’d have missed Christmas Eve. And I *love* Christmas Eve. We hang our stockings and we drink hot apple cider, we sing carols, we listen to stories and...”

“All right,” said the Christmas Magician, “I understand. I’ll make it be Christmas Eve instead. How would that be?”

“That would be great!” said Alex.

So, once again the Christmas Magician gathered himself up taller than he had been. He puffed up his chest. He began to wave his wand this way and that way. He began to chant... “Abracadabra, ali kazam... let it be Christmas Eve as fast as...”

“Wait!!” Alex cried out again.

“What now?!” asked the once again deflated looking Christmas Magician.

“Well, if it was Christmas Eve already, that would mean that I would have missed the Christmas play at my church. I love the Christmas play! I’m going to be one of the shepherds this year! Could we make it a week before Christmas?”

“Oh... I suppose we could,” said the Christmas Magician. “After all, my job, my *whole* purpose is to make children happy! So that’s what I’ll do...”

So, yet another time the Christmas Magician gathered himself up taller than he had been (though actually not as tall as he had been the first time or the second time). He puffed up his chest (but not as much as he had the first time or the second time). He began to wave his wand this way and that way. He began to chant... Abracadabra, ali kazam... let it be a week before Christmas as fast as...”

“Wait! Stop! Stop!!” Alex cried out yet another time.

“Oh my... what is it this time?” said the Christmas Magician – who now was looking smaller than ever, and sadder too.

“Well, if it was a week before Christmas, that would mean that Grandma had already come; and I love meeting Grandma at the door when Dad brings her home from the airport. Could we make it two weeks?... No, no, no... then we would already have decorated the tree... I don’t want to miss that! And I need to have time to make my Christmas presents...”

“How about... how about three weeks before Christmas? Could you do that, o Christmas Magician?”

The Christmas Magician was beginning to look very sad and tired, but he readied himself one more time... because, after all, he did like to make children happy. So, he waved his wand this way and that way. He began to chant... “Abracadabra, ali kazam... let it be three weeks before Christmas as fast as...”

“Wait!” This time it was the Christmas Magician who stopped his own magic spell.

“What’s wrong Christmas Magician?” asked Alex.

“It’s *already* three weeks before Christmas!”

Now the Christmas Magician was crying.

“Why are you crying, Christmas Magician?”

“Because I *never* get to use my magic! It always happens this way! Just when I’m waving my wand and almost finished with my magic words, every little boy or girl stops me, just the way you have. I *never* get to use my magic...”

They were both quiet for a while.

Except for an occasional sob from the Christmas Magician.

And then Alex spoke: “But don’t feel sad.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ve been a *very* big help. You’ve given me the best Christmas gift of all.”

“What do you mean?” And the Christmas Magician wiped away a tear.

Alex tried to think of the right words. “Well, you’ve made Christmas... *bigger* for me. Now I see that in a way Christmas is *all* the good things that will happen between now and... Christmas. Christmas is in the giving time, and it’s in the waiting time too! Thank you, Christmas Magician!”

“Thank *you!*” said the Christmas Magician. “You’ve given *me* the best Christmas gift too!” The Christmas Magician looked happy again – and bigger, too. And then...

POOF!! The Christmas Magician was gone. And Alex was asleep.

In the morning, Alex woke up wondering if it had all been a dream. So, at first Alex felt sad, thinking it *had* been only a dream. But inside Alex’s slipper was something... what was it. Just a long purple thread. But then Alex realized it could only be one thing: It was a strand of the Christmas Magician’s wild hair!

And when Alex had pulled the purple thread – the Magician’s strand of hair – all the way out of the slipper, there was what could only be one of the Christmas Magician’s stars.

And the star reminded Alex of all the things the Christmas Magician had taught (whether he meant to or not) about the big meaning of Christmas.

Alex put the little star in a pocket, a reminder of the Christmas Magician and the magic he didn’t have to use. It would be Alex’s star of magic, star of wonder, star of giving time... and star of waiting time too.

“And who knows,” Alex thought, “maybe *I* can be a Christmas Magician too! All year long!”

It was going to be the best Christmas ever!

Readings

Matthew 13:31-32 and 45-46

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

Gospel of Thomas, saying 113:

His disciples said to him, "When is the kingdom going to come?" Jesus said, "It is not by being waited for that it is going to come. They are not going to say, 'Here it is' or 'There it is.' Rather, the kingdom is spread out over the earth, and people do not see it."

Sermon: “Jesus and the Christmas Magician”

Really, Jesus and the Christmas Magician? What could Jesus possibly have in common with the fictional, in fact made-up by me, Christmas Magician?

Well, there is much that they *don't* have in common. We could make a list.

But there are a couple of things I believe they do share. Here's the first: Each in their own way counselled patience.

As for the Christmas Magician, it's pretty clear that was at the heart of his message to Alex. Be patient! And not just because, magic aside, you can't make the season go any faster no matter how much you wished for it to speed up... so you might as well hunker down and grit your teeth and wait.

No, rather, as Alex gradually learned, with patience you get to fully savor each experience leading up to the big day. So, as Alex finally realized, Christmas is actually way bigger than one day – Christmas includes everything that leads up to the day: Decorating, making or buying just the right gift, sharing special meals and time with family you maybe haven't seen for a long time, and so on.

In other words, patience, rightly understood, is not about “grin and bear it.” Patience is about presence.

As for Jesus? I'm not sure if the word “patience” – or the word “presence” – occurs in the Gospels. But I do believe patience and presence are implicit in much, if not all, of Jesus's ministry and teaching.

Earlier we heard two brief passages from the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Thomas about the kingdom of heaven. And it is the “kingdom of heaven” that was at the core of what Jesus preached and taught and at the core of how he lived. (And though some these days call it the “reign of heaven” to avoid patriarchal language, I'm sticking with “kingdom” because of the subversive way Jesus uses the word: subversive, because he knew that his listeners – us

too – usually thought of “kingdoms” in worldly terms – but he was flipping this on its head, preaching and teaching a very different sort of kingdom – we might say in, but not of, the world as the world is mostly organized.)

All that said, what was and is this kingdom that Jesus talked about and lived?

First, in the two brief parables from Matthew, Jesus made clear just how remarkable and important this “kingdom” is. Important enough, like the pearl of great price, to sell everything. Further, we’re told, though it might look small at the outset, it turns out it’s the biggest reality of all, like the tiny mustard seed growing into a huge tree.

Okay – important and big. But, still, just what is this so-called “kingdom”? Here’s where the saying we heard from the Gospel of Thomas comes in. The disciples have been confused (as they often are in the Gospels, serving as foils that enable Jesus to make his points). The disciples think the “kingdom,” like a worldly kingdom, must be somewhere you can find it, over there or over there. Or maybe that it is a someday sort of kingdom, something to wait for or work for.

What does Jesus say in response to these misunderstandings? The kingdom is everywhere, right in front of you, among you, within you... *and you simply aren't seeing it.*

So... this gets us back to the deeper understanding of patience.

The disciples thought they had to wait, maybe impatiently, for the kingdom, like Alex waiting for Christmas. But Jesus’s message? Stop waiting... and look, notice, experience what’s already right in front of you!

Which, as I said, is how Jesus lived – his example better than any words. For it is clear from all the accounts we have of his life, that Jesus was fully present for every encounter:

Someone needed a healing touch? He was there.

Someone needed to hear a particular message? Whether the lawyer sarcastically asking Jesus who his neighbor is or to those ready to stone a woman for her supposed sins? Well, Jesus had just the right message for the moment and the person. Your neighbor is... everyone. And... who is perfect enough to throw stones at someone else?

Jesus, not gritting his teeth to wait out some situation or to think it through logically, but present in the fullness of the moment and the need of the moment and the need of the person right in front of him. Living in the kingdom.

Which is why I’ve come to my own understanding of the kingdom of heaven, kingdom of God, as surprisingly simple (though profound and just as important as those parables suggest).

Here’s one way of putting it: We enter the “kingdom” every time we act as Jesus did – with a healing word or a helping hand: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or just hold the door open for the next person, or put a little more in our Guest at Your Table boxes or the UU Service Committee.

All about love of course. Which indeed begins when we are fully present – *patiently*. A word, then, about love and the kingdom.

Paul, in the well-known passage from his letter to the Corinthians does use the word patience. And he affirms, among other things, that “love is patient.” Which does not mean just that love is willing to put up with stuff. Oh, that may end up being part of it – but, again, not in a grit your teeth sort of way. Rather, at the heart of love as patient is, again, being fully present to the one you love. Just present.

As the Christmas Magician – back, finally, to that wild and crazy guy – was for Alex!

And you know, it occurs to me that maybe the Christmas Magician was a sort of trickster, whether intentionally or unintentionally, maybe sort of knowing how it would go, how he wouldn't be able to use his magic, and how that would lead to the much more important result for Alex, a transformation in Alex's understanding of Christmas... and maybe of life.

One more thought this morning

The kingdom of heaven right here and now?! What about all the hate we see around us and the violence, and the many ways in which we are desecrating our Earth home, making it increasingly uninhabitable for thousands of species, maybe eventually even for us, our human family.

The kingdom of heaven?!

Well... at the end of my morning run this past Thursday – that day when the sun rose in a bright blue sky over a coating of freshly fallen snow – I stood on our deck doing my post-run stretching and I looked up at the pattern of bare branches against that blue sky, heard a few wintering birds calling, and felt at home in the beauty of it all – the kingdom of heaven indeed. And isn't it that sort of realization, that sort of presence to the beauty above us and behind us, as a Navaho prayer puts it, that will lead us to work to care for the creation, which is indeed in deep trouble – caring work that leads us deeper into the kingdom you might say. Just as experiencing the beauty of a child may lead us to work to care for that child and for all children – work that leads us deeper into the kingdom.

And so on. You see, the kingdom is and is not perfect.

A Zen master once told his students that they were perfect just the way they are... and that they could use a little improvement.

Another way of expressing the paradox of the kingdom in which we live and move and have our being.

With enough patience to enable us to see the beauty in the creation, in one another, and indeed in our own higher and best Selves. And then to *live* the kingdom message of presence and care and love.

Why not?

May it always be so.