

Singing as if We Believe
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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If you know the words, sing the first verse with me of “Hark the Herald Angels”. It is one of my favorite carols. In my mind’s ear (so to speak) I can still hear my mother’s piano accompaniment from the “Fireside Book of Folk Songs” as our family sang together fifty and more years ago:

Hark the herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled"
Joyful, all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With the angelic host proclaim:
"Christ is born in Bethlehem"
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"

Now, as we gathered around the piano in the evening as Christmas approached, like many others we generally tended to sing just one verse of each carol. This – singing only the first verse – is a relevant piece of information particularly in relation to this carol, as we’ll see in a moment.

But first: Moving forward in time: A week or so before Christmas about twenty-five years ago, an article appeared in the Boston Globe which described the Unitarian Universalist approach (or approaches) to Christmas.

I think it was not coincidence that on that Christmas Eve an older woman who I did not know said something like this to me on the way out the door: “How can you sing those carols when you don’t even believe the words?”

I had no chance to respond, and wouldn’t have had the time to respond adequately in that setting, with two or three hundred others coming along behind her.

But she surely got me to thinking.

Not that I hadn’t given this some thought before, but I was reminded by that woman’s honest appraisal from her point of view that it might not be clear to everyone (maybe not even to ourselves!) how it is we can sing these traditional carols with words that on the face of it may not seem to square with the theology or religious understandings that most of us have.

And *that* year we may have just sung as our closing carol all three verses of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” – and here is the second verse, which as you will hear is heavier on theology than even the first:

Christ by highest heav'n adored
Christ the everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come
Offspring of a Virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see

Hail the incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"

How *do* we Unitarian Universalists, with our many and varied theological perspectives, sing these words honestly? *Can we?*

Actually... maybe as simple as this:

You've heard me affirm many times how important it is to understand that most religious language is metaphor, and therefore is best understood as metaphor. Of course there are many people who disagree, who in fact affirm that the truth of Christianity, for example, can only be properly grasped in literal terms. But such folks actually have no more right to the stories and truths of the Gospels and of Christian teachings or the poetry of the Christmas carols than you or I.

This said... how about that second verse of "Hark the Herald Angels" – even metaphorically?

Well, it seems to me that the essential idea is summarized in a way in the final lines of the verse:

"Pleased as man with man to dwell / Jesus our Emmanuel."

The word "Emmanuel" comes from the Hebrew and means simply "God is with us."

So the hymn proclaims that the man Jesus is "the incarnate deity" – Jesus as Christ, the son of God made flesh... God with us, Emmanuel. Many, perhaps most (but not all), Christians proclaim that Jesus was unique in that respect.

But, closer to my thinking, others affirm that Jesus was simply – and powerfully – a sage who, like other great sages and wisdom teachers, experienced God within him and taught that God is within and among all of us: "The Kingdom of God is within," the gospels tell us Jesus proclaimed, indeed within you and me and among us all: Emmanuel – God within each of us and among all of us. We simply and sadly too often – maybe most often – don't see. Jesus, in this way of understanding his message and who he was, was just trying to get us to open our eyes to this Kingdom which is already and always spread before us.

But how about "offspring of a virgin's womb"? Well, I am skeptical to say the least of the literal truth of this statement. But by evoking with these words the Gospel stories of Jesus' birth, we are reminded of the evocative metaphorical power of those stories:

Love and truth and grace and power born in a humble manger to a poor couple, Joseph maybe not even the biological father – humble indeed, maybe even shameful. Yet even there, maybe especially there: A divine child, love born anew, not just *reminding* us to love, but evoking love... the story, the images, opening our hearts. Which is precisely the point.

So, the third verse:

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings
Ris'n with healing in His wings

Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"

A hymn of praise not, for me anyway, to one man born two thousand years ago, but to the “prince of peace, son of righteousness” that dwells within each of us. And the “second birth” not in some next life, but when we realize, experience, this divine presence, reality, love, within each of our hearts here and now.

Yes, “glory to the newborn King” which is the life and love that can be re-born within each of us – when we open eyes and ears and hearts to it.

I’m only skating on the surface of all this of course.

Another, simpler way of answering the question as to how religious liberals can sing words that we probably don’t believe literally is to remember that these carols are poems. And a poem – of course often filled with metaphor – is not always meant to be parsed and divided and conquered with analysis and reasoned investigation (as I’ve just been doing!). There is sometimes a place for that, but more often we are best served by a poem if we let the words and images wash over us, allow them to work their way into our entire beings and not just our minds, feel what the words and images evoke, allow ourselves maybe to be changed, maybe awakened to a new way of living. The poems that are the Christmas carols can do this.

Well, there are many more carols, including others of which that include, shall we say, other challenging theological propositions. But I would invite us not to approach them as theological treatises, but rather as the poems filled with metaphor that they are, using the language of the heart to evoke more than the language of the mind to convince.

We are of course more than welcome to argue the theology, but if that’s all we do we may be missing the awakening that just might come this year... maybe every year if we... just sing.

And... fact is, as I suggested earlier, nobody owns the carols! So no one has a lock on what the words mean, or what it means to “believe” the words.

Finally, in spite of what some say, there are also larger meanings to what we now call Christmas than the purely and sometimes narrowly Christian. In this spirit, you could put it this way, that Christmas became Christians’ way of celebrating the far more ancient solstice festivals of all kinds at this time of year in the northern hemisphere, festivals of light shining in the darkness, festivals of hope and joy, festivals of love reborn, festivals of simple and joyful revelry at the time of shortest days and long, dark nights.

It should not therefore be surprising that there are songs and carols in this larger spirit as well – some of them old, some of them new: from English wassailing songs to Jingle Bells and White Christmas.

Here, for example, is an old French tune to which new words were put not too many years ago by Susan Cooper for the “Christmas Revels”.

The title is “Sing We Noel” – so before we sing it is worth noting the derivation of the word “noel”. Though sometimes simply used as a synonym for Christmas (French

Christians wish one another not “Merry Christmas” but “Joyeux Noel”), the derivation of the word back through French and Latin means things like “news” or “birth” – and in Middle English means a “shout for joy.”

So, just like Christmas itself, many meanings, all related to this season of joy and new birth.

So, let's sing again. Your part, frequently repeated – with spirit I hope – is: “Sing we Noel, Noel, Noel!”

Over the snowy hill the travellers go,
Sing we Noel, Noel, Noel!
Calling to wake the sleeping town below,
Sing we Noel, Noel, Noel!
We bring you joy upon this star,
That breaks the darkness from afar;
Sing we Noel, Noel, Noel!

Nearer they come, their voices clear and high,
Sing we Noel, Noel, Noel!
Calling their promise through the frosty sky,
Sing we Noel, Noel, Noel!
“We bring you love, the faithful light
Of dawn that comes to end the night:
Sing we Noel, Noel, Noel.”

Sing then and join them as they go their way,
Sing we Noel, Noel, Noel!
Crossing the world with greetings for this day,
Sing we Noel, Noel, Noel!
“We bring you peace, to cherish long,
And let tomorrow hear our song:
Sing we Noel, Noel, Noel!”

This season – season of Advent leading to Christmas, of Hanukkah, of Solstice, of Kwanzaa, and then the New Year – is in our northern hemisphere always the darkest time of year; and in this year of national and global troubles of many kinds it may seem darker than usual.

It seems to me, then, that it is well worth remembering the truth we just heard evoked in the song. It is the truth that on one level is what *all* the festivals of the season teach us through metaphor, poetry, ritual, story, and song: namely that it is in the dark that gestation takes place, that seeds of love and peace are planted and begin to grow. Or, as a poet (Theodore Roethke) once wrote, “In a dark time, the eye begins to see” – to see the love ever present, to see the ways in which we are all family.

One way or another, this *is* the message of all the carols and songs and stories of the season, a message that unites rather than divides, this message of love and hope and joy and peace, this simple yet profound message we need this year surely, and every year.

So may it always be.