

Each Night a Child is Born is a Holy Night
Sunday, December 24, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

I have been using stories and readings from the Unitarian Universalist religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs tonight. She tells what she calls “wonder stories” of three miraculous births of men who were proclaimed to become kings, none of whom did. She declares all of them great teachers and, I think, suggests that as such they had more influence over the world than any king ever had. As teachers they taught peace in an age in which a good part of what kings did was wage war.

She is a teacher herself, a religious educator. She does not claim to be of the same caliber as Jesus or the Buddha or Confucius, but she knows she can learn from each of them and that she herself has something to teach.

Fahs wrote, “The religious way is the deep way, the way with a growing perspective and an expanding view. It is the way that dips into the heart of things, into personal feelings, yearnings, and hostilities that often must be buried and despised and left misunderstood.

“The religious way is the way that sees what physical eyes alone fail to see, the intangibles at the heart of every phenomenon.

“The religious way is the way that touches universal relationships; that goes high, wide and deep, that expands the feelings of kinship.”

“And if God symbolizes or means these larger relationships, the religious way means finding God; but the word in itself is not too important. It is the enlarged and deepening experiences that bring the growing insights and that create the sustaining ambition ‘to find life and find it abundantly that really count most.’”

“When such a religious quality of exploration is the goal, any subject, any phenomenon, any thing, animate or inanimate, human or animal, may be the starting point.”

And so tonight we take as our starting point on this night’s spiritual quest wonder stories of the births of great teachers, stories of dragons and unicorns and angels, stories of men whose greatness was not won by the sword as so often a king’s are but by their words and how those words touched people’s hearts.

On December 13 Gil Zohar of Religion Unplugged published an article about a creche at a Lutheran church this year in Bethlehem. “A church in the West Bank city of Bethlehem has

politicized its annual nativity scene, laying a figure of baby Jesus amid the rubble of a destroyed masonry building to represent the Gaza Strip this Christmas season.

“This is what Christmas looks like in Palestine,’ Rev. Dr. Munther Ishaq, the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, told Al-Jazeera, explaining that his crèche featuring building debris was a gesture of solidarity with Gaza’s beleaguered civilians caught between Hamas gunmen and Israeli Defense Forces....

“Christmas is the solidarity of God with those who are oppressed, with those who are suffering, and if Jesus is to be born again, this time this year he will be born in Gaza under the rubble in solidarity with the people of Gaza,’ Ishaq said. ‘Our hope is in our faith. Our hope is in our resilience. So while Christmas celebrations are canceled, Christmas prayers are not canceled. And maybe when we look at the image of Jesus under the rubble, we see a light of hope and life coming out of destruction, life coming out of death,’”

When we tell the birth story of Jesus there is a traditional part we often skip. From the Christian gospel of Matthew. “When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

“A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”

There are wars between Hamas and Israel, between Ukraine and Russia, civil war in Sudan. But the teachers who would not be kings have told us peace is the way. From Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called (children) of God.” From the Buddha- “Conquer the angry (one) by love. Conquer the ill-natured (one) by goodness. Conquer the miser with generosity. Conquer the liar with truth.” From Confucius- “When music and courtesy are better understood and appreciated, there will be no war.”

On this holy night may we believers and non-believers find the peace these teachers taught, the peace they say the angels sang. For as Fahn said, “Life becomes religious whenever we make it so: when some new light is seen, when some deeper appreciation is felt, when some larger outlook is gained, when some nobler purpose is formed, when some task is well done.” May in this way peace begin in us. May it be so.