

The Source of Meaning
Presented by Rev. Margie King Saphier on November 30, 2004
At United First Parish Church, Quincy, MA

I hope everyone had a good Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is a holiday that highlights the transitions in families. We are acutely aware of who is no longer sitting at the table. We are also aware when a new person joins us. Some Thanksgivings can seem like a depressing family obligation, while others are full of good cheer and authenticity. As soon as Thanksgiving is over, Christmas season begins.

The Christian meaning of Christmas celebrates the birth of God Incarnate. Most Unitarian Universalists observe Christmas in the belief that every child is born with “the spark of the Divine.” Every child is a miracle of creation. This holiday season begs the question; what is your understanding of The Most Holy, if it means The Ultimate Source of Meaning? What are the images of the Ground of Being, of God, of the Interdependent Web of Existence that you invite to sit at the table with you to give thanks? What images are absent?

These are not idle questions. If everything is a manifestation of the Holy, then we need to be aware of how we relate to one another, to other countries, to the planet earth. I am deeply worried that the United States for all its proclamations of faith has lost sight of how sacred ALL creation is. Whether you believe in God or not, it is important for all to remember that it is always easy to love the individual who looks like you, dresses like you, and votes like you. The challenge is love the stranger.

In many ways Jesus’ teachings reflected this challenge. Jesus’ use of parables was essential to his preaching, because these parables pointed toward **a reversal of the expected or respected order of things that were declared to be a mark of God’s reign.** Jesus use of the common mustard seed as the symbol of the Kingdom of

God was a puzzlement to the people of that time. The mustard seed was common, found everywhere. It grew easily and was often thought of as a weed. So how could this common seed be like the Kingdom of God? Liberal thinkers interpret this metaphor as an example that heaven is here on earth, ... we work together to bring it into being. **Likewise Jesus' actions called for a reversal of many of the accepted values.** So Jesus called out to the outcasts of society at that time: the lame, the blind, the deaf, lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors. **Jesus overturned the accepted boundaries of society in his openness toward women.**

Jesus was challenging the people to expand who and what they would include as Holy. In this same spirit of challenging the accepted values of society, we, as Unitarian Universalists, actively affirm the inherent dignity of gay men and lesbians by welcoming them into our congregations as equals, by ordaining those who are called to ministry and by marrying same sex couples who want to promise to one another their love and commitment. But before we all puff ourselves up with pride; I think the challenge for each one of us is to explore the values we take for granted and the accepted perceptions we have toward people, and see if we need to knock down some of those creating barriers.

Every religion has a cosmology in which the creation story supports its belief system. The Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources suggest a cosmology when they proclaim that we affirm the inherent dignity of the individual and conclude that we affirm the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. It is a cosmology that suggests the importance of interdependent relationships and mutuality. Because Unitarian Universalists recognize science and reason as one of our many sources, most accept the Big Bang Theory and evolution as part of our cosmology. Just an aside, Charles Darwin was Unitarian and he published *The Origin of the Species* on November 23, 1859, 165 years ago. Spiritually this cosmology when it includes the interdependent web of existence

supports the theology articulated by Shug in the reading by Alice Walker: “.. it come to me that feeling of being part everything, not separate at all. I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed.”

According to a recent Gallup Poll most people in the U.S. do not have this cosmology. Did you know that in the United States, 48% of the population believe in creationism, with 9% leaning toward creationism; whereas 28% of the population believe in evolution, with 5% leaning toward evolution. Ten per cent have no opinion. (1,016 adults were surveyed 2/19 - 21/2001).

I find these figures are alarming because ones' cosmology effects how we relate to one another. As I said earlier, all religions have cosmologies to explain the purpose and meaning of life. In creationism, which rejects evolution, mankind is seen as the eponymy of creation but separate from it. It sets up a world-view in which the complexity of life is reduced to the simplicity of dualities.

This may explain the popularity of the serial books titled “Left Behind” by Tim La Haye and Jerry Jenkins based on the Book of Revelation in the Bible. In this series everyone who is not a born-again Christian - in other words the Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Unitarian Universalists, agnostics and atheists - is heaved into everlasting fire and I quote from the book; “Jesus merely raised one hand a few inches and ... they [the non-believers] tumbled in, howling and screeching.” Part of the joy of being saved is watching the agony of the damned. It is the ultimate “I told you so. I'm right, you're wrong.”

In this rendering, Jesus is the warrior who avenges the faithful, just as Yahweh was understood by the early Israelites when he smite their enemies. I often read the Old Testament as a record of the people's faith development in their understanding of God and their relationship to that God. The early Israelites initially understood Yahweh as an avenging warrior. Over time they came to

understand Yahweh to be a compassionate God. So in the Book of Amos, which was written about 600 BCE, the prophet warns the Israelites that their worshipping of Yahweh is for naught, because they commit war crimes against their neighbors; and among their own people, they take advantage of the poor, widows and children. The people's understanding of Yahweh has matured to be a compassionate judge demanding justice for all people.

Fundamentalist Christian who subscribe to the beliefs in "Left Behind," remind me of the early Israelites in their faith development. It is the mentality that my god is bigger than your god and my god can beat your God up. We have heard this type of theology expressed by a general in the U.S. Army in reference to the Christian God being greater than the God of Islam. The tragedy of this simplistic theology of good and evil, of the saved and the unsaved is its corrosive effects that pervade our culture. We see this simplistic theology of duality in the ever-present signs that say "God Bless America," as if God is on the side of the United States. Instead we need signs that say "God Help Us to Live Peacefully with our Neighbors" or "God Bless the World."

We see this simplistic theology of duality in the violent games that are on the market for the Christmas season. They are a blasphemy to the very meaning of Christmas. In case you have not heard, there is a new online game called "Kill JFK" in which you are sniper in the Texas Book Depository and you get three tries to kill JFK. Another game that is not new, but is up-dated every year for Christmas is Grand Theft Auto. My three adult sons told me I should not talk about this game until I have played it. I have not played Grand Theft Auto, and I don't plan to. It is a game in which you the player steal a car. The rest of the game entails the tactics you use to outsmart the police. Most tactics use violence. In fact violence is encouraged by giving you more points.

I started this sermon by saying the Christmas season marks the birth of God Incarnate. Whether you believe in Jesus as the Son of God or believe that Christmas celebrates the love and hope that resides in each one of us, we need to practice everyday human acts of loving-kindness so that love and compassion prevails. Games that require repetitive acts of violence becomes a practice of violence. I truly believe we human beings have to make the daily deliberate choice to intentionally practice acts of loving kindness always looking for ways to enlarge our circle of inclusively. The litmus test for all faiths or religious beliefs is COMPASSION.

Karen Armstrong, philosopher and historian of religion says, "Compassion has been advocated by all the great faiths because it has been found to be the safest and surest means of attaining enlightenment. Compassion dethrones the ego from the center of our lives and puts others there, thus breaking down the narcissistic tendencies we all possess which hold us back from the experience of the sacred. Compassion gives us ecstasy, thus broadening our perspectives and giving us a larger enhanced vision."

As we heard in the Mathew Fox reading, The Dali Lama said and I quote, "Every thing starts with us, with each of us. The indispensable qualities are peace of mind and compassion. Without them it's useless even to try. Those qualities are indispensable; they are also inevitable. I have told you: We will surely find them in ourselves, if we take the trouble to search for them. We can reject every form of religion, but we can't reject and cast off compassion and peace of mind.' Inner work, that which learns compassion and peace of mind, is key to being human and is the key practice in spiritual traditions."

May we, during this season of hope, love and compassion, invite different images of the sacred to our table by practicing acts of loving kindness, especially with people who are not normally in our comfort zone. May it be so.