

## Jesus the Baby, Jesus the Bathwater

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A few decades ago, UU minister Peter Raible published this classic

parody:

God rest ye, Unitarians, let nothing you dismay,  
Remember there's no evidence there was a Christmas Day.  
When Christ was born is just not known, no matter what they say,  
O tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,  
Glad tidings of reason and fact.

Our current Christmas customs came from Persia and from Greece,  
From solstice celebrations of the ancient Middle East.  
This whole darn Christmas spiel is just another pagan feast.  
O tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,  
Glad tidings of reason and fact.

There was no star of Bethlehem, there was no angels' song,  
There could not have been wise men for the trip would take too long.  
The stories in the Bible are historically wrong,  
O tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,  
Glad tidings of reason and fact.

It is by now a familiar paradox that Unitarian Universalist churches, which are generally quite far removed from orthodox Christian beliefs, are quite big on celebrating Christmas. The paradox is so familiar that it has become almost comfortable.

And it is understandable in light of our history. As my colleague John Nichols is fond of pointing out, we own this holiday. In the Nineteenth Century, both Unitarians and Universalists took the lead in promoting a public celebration of the birth of Jesus. And while both denominations and the combined denominations have moved a great deal towards humanism since those early days, we still generally celebrate Christmas with some fervor. I know of no UU congregation which does not observe Christmas; I've heard of some which drop Easter in favor of a spring celebration, but I've never heard of one which ignored Christmas.

And it is not just the secular aspects of the holiday which we celebrate. Yes you will occasionally see a Santa Claus or Frosty the Snowman in a UU sanctuary, but it is surprising the extent to which UUs will agree with our more conservative neighbors that there ought to be some Christ in Christmas. For what I and many of us love about the holiday is the spirit of giving and generosity, which is what we take from the life and teachings of Jesus.

Well, that's what I want to talk about this morning, what can we make of this figure Jesus, and I start out by acknowledging that for many of us, Jesus is a very difficult figure. Some of us are of Jewish heritage, and for those, Jesus may be "their" guy but certainly not "our" guy. Jesus was the one who was keeping you out of that Christmas party, showering your neighbors with gifts while reminding you of your differences. Jesus may have even made you hate your father for insisting that no, our family is not going to put up a tree.

Others who were raised in Catholic churches may see Jesus as a magical figure whose powers you tried fervently to believe in but finally concluded that it was, after all, just a plaster statue. Jesus was sold as the perfect being, but all he did was remind you of how miserably far you were from perfection in your own life. And then the church fathers who were supposed to uphold this Jesus were shown to have feet of clay themselves.

Others who were raised in Protestant churches may identify Jesus with redemption from sin, the path to eternal life, a concept which began to break apart when you realized that you didn't want to consider yourself inherently flawed, that that wasn't a very healthy attitude to carry through life.

So for many of us who come to UUISM from more orthodox faiths. Jesus can be toxic. For others who were UUs or unchurched. Jesus may seem irrelevant, something other people do but which has very little to do with what you are about.

I want to be quite clear here: I am going to discuss my own attitude towards Jesus, but the point of this is to stimulate your thinking, not to tell you what your attitude ought to be. I would like to encourage us to see Jesus as our guy, a true liberal, but you will take whatever rings true to you.

A fairly large part of what I am about as a minister is separating the baby from the bathwater when it comes to Jesus. It may interest you to know that that phrase, separating the baby from the bathwater, came from the time before modern plumbing, when all bathing water had to be heated on a stove and poured into a tub in the middle of the kitchen floor. All the members of the family had to bathe in the same water, starting with the eldest. By the time it came to bathe the youngest, that water was pretty dirty from everyone that had gone before, and sometimes the baby would be lost in the bathwater.

And sometimes I think we lose the baby Jesus in the dirty bathwater of 2000 years of church doctrine distorting the simple but powerful message of this teacher. So here is my personal tour of the baby and the bathwater.

First in the bathwater category I would put the virgin birth. If you look at the prophecy in Isaiah that supposedly foretold the virgin birth<sup>1</sup>, it is clear that it is talking about something completely different than a Messiah and that it relies on

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<sup>1</sup>Isaiah 7: 14; see Matthew 1:23. The Hebrew word "almah" is properly

translated as "young woman" but the Greek translators of the Septuagint rendered

it as virgin, and this mistranslation is apparently the basis for the use in Matthew.

an error in translation. Moreover, the Gospel of Thomas, an ancient text which was only discovered sixty years ago starts with a prologue that claims it was being written by Jesus' twin brother.

A second round of bathwater, in my view, is the idea that Jesus was a fulfillment of messianic prophecies. I won't go into detail here, but if you compare the claims of prophecy fulfillment in the Gospel accounts with the passages in the Hebrew prophets which supposedly foretold this, you will see a misuse of precedent that would get a lawyer disbarred. I understand that the Gospel writers were trying to appeal to Jews at a time of great crisis in Judaism, but that does not mean that the case is persuasive today 2000 years later.

A third bit of bathwater for me is Jesus' uniquely divine nature. Conventional Christian theology holds that Christ was both fully God and fully human. Against this William Ellery Channing, in his classic 1817 sermon "Unitarian Christianity," argued what still seems to me to be a sensible position: that Jesus is "one mind, one soul, one being, as truly one as we are, and equally distinct from the one God. This is the classic Unitarian position, but Emerson gives it a transcendentalist twist: we are all part of the divine, and Jesus was too, only no more so than you and I. Both the classic Unitarian position and the transcendentalist one are at odds with the notion expressed in orthodox Christianity that Jesus is divine, while also being fully human, but you and I are not divine.

A fourth bit of bathwater is the notion that Jesus died for our sins, that Jesus' death was the sacrifice that God demanded be made in order to redeem humankind. Our Universalist prophet Hosea Ballou wrote a book<sup>2</sup> demonstrating that it didn't really make much sense for the omnipotent creator of the universe to require a sacrifice of his only son. Who was doing the sacrifice? If God is all powerful, you'd have to say that God is the ultimate motivating force behind it. But it is a sacrifice in God's honor, to atone for Adam's original sin? God is at once the sacrificer, the sacrificial lamb and the one to whom the sacrifice is made? That may have been an argument that St. Paul found helped him sell this Jewish religion to the Greek world, but again it doesn't have a lot of persuasive force today.

While we're at it, I would count as bathwater the whole notion of original sin stemming from the Garden of Eden. It seems totally disproportionate to punish the whole race for the simple sin of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Isn't a knowledge of good and evil a good thing? I believe that good and evil are human inventions, and there is a vast realm of reality which is beyond good and evil, but I also think that to have a society and to live one's life in it, a working knowledge of good and evil is indispensable. Why would a just God impose an eternal punishment on the whole race for a simple disobedience which gave the human race useful knowledge?

But let's get back to Jesus. St. Paul's claim, which is repeated in every Christian communion service, is that the Jesus' death creates a new covenant with

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<sup>2</sup>A Treatise on Atonement, 1805

God which supersedes the old covenant with the Jews. This position is known as supersessionism, and to me it is another lot of bathwater. When I look at Jesus, I start with the fact that he was a Jew. Whatever St. Paul wanted to argue in his attempt to proselytize the Gentiles, I don't think Jesus would have maintained that his ministry supplanted Judaism. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17)

A related bit of bathwater is Christian triumphalism, the notion that Christianity is the only true religion. This is expressed most strongly in the Gospel of John: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the father except through me<sup>3</sup>." Our tradition, by contrast, emphasizes pluralism. We draw religions inspiration from many sources.

Another bit of bathwater is the requirement of belief. The Gospel of John is particularly vociferous in its insistence that you have to believe in Jesus in order to be saved<sup>4</sup>. This notion is very un-Jewish. Traditionally the definition of a good Jew had been how he or she behaved, whether she or he followed the law, not on belief in God. To me faith is less a matter of belief and more a matter of trust. When I say I have faith in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, I am not saying that I believe that all people are inherently good as a factual proposition, but that I choose as an ethical proposition to treat them as if they are and to trust that treating them as if they are will help me to see their essential humanity and will encourage them to see mine.

It follows that the notion that only those who accept Jesus Christ as their lord and savior are saved is also bathwater. As I listened to my mother's Episcopal funeral service last week, I could not help but reflect that mother, devout Episcopalian that she was, wouldn't have bought all of the rhetoric about only those who believe being saved. One of her best, most faithful friends in all the world is Jewish, and mother confided in me several times that she couldn't buy the proposition that Libby Fechter was going to hell just because she was not a believing Christian.

Now there are many more parts of the orthodox picture of Jesus that I could enumerate to disagree with. There is lots of bathwater; most of the Nicene Creed is bathwater to me, that's why I left the Episcopal church, and why I did not say the creed at my mother's funeral, though I did take communion.

Well, at this point you may well be asking, is there a baby in that bathwater? Why should we bother with a Jesus at all?

I think there is, but I admit that it's a painful and frustrating task to try to peel back all the layers of distortions introduced by the Christian church over the years and find what the real Jesus probably taught and said. To follow modern New Testament scholarship can be fascinating for those so inclined, but it can be confusing and sometimes it seems like a sterile exercise, devoid of any impact on

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<sup>3</sup> John 14:6

<sup>4</sup>John 3:16

the heart or the real world.

But it is important, for the findings of the scholars coincides with my own heart interests. I find the Jesus who gives me inspiration in the Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, in the mission instructions, in the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, in the practice of radical hospitality at his table. These are the parts of the New Testament which scholars think most accurately reflect the historical Jesus. Yes, I do pick and choose among passages in the Bible; I give a lot more weight to some than I do to others. But so does everybody else on all ends of the theological spectrum whatever they may say to the contrary. My choosing tries to be informed by dispassionate scholarship, but of course, I am also guided by my own values.

So I am inclined to hold on to Jesus the Baby when he says (Matthew 5)  
3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

Or when he says (Matthew 5),

14 "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. 15 No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Or when he says

"... if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

Or when he says

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be whole, therefore, as your heavenly Father is whole."

All of these words of Jesus the baby are found in the same chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, and they all come from the Sermon on the Mount, which scholars believe is most likely to have been the words of the historical Jesus.

But here it is a Christmastime and I'm going on about the Sermon on the Mount. What is the relation of this Jesus that we can hold onto to the Jesus of the birth narratives. We separate the baby from the bathwater, and you may do it differently from me, but the larger question that arises at this time of year is what does Jesus the baby have to do with the little baby Jesus?

The scholars don't give a lot of historical credence to the stories of Jesus' birth. They are found in only two of the four Gospels, Luke and Matthew, and the

accounts are different and mutually inconsistent. They resemble the miracle stories which grew up around the births of other religious leaders such as the Buddha and Confucius. In our reading today, I showed the parallel between the Magnificat, the hymn of praise sung by Mary in the Gospel of Luke after she learns that she is pregnant with Jesus, to the Song of Hannah in the Hebrew Bible, after Hannah learns that God has answered her prayer for a child, who became Samuel, the granddaddy of Hebrew prophets.

But the weakness of the birth stories as history need not deter us from celebrating the birth of Jesus as a great spiritual leader and teacher. Jesus teachings are a light in the world, a light which is an important component of the liberal values by which we live, and which we seek to have the rest of the world live by. The whole of Western culture celebrates a spirit of Christmas which is based on the values taught by Jesus, values of generosity and selflessness.

These are well summed up in the nephew's speech to Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's "A Christmas Carol." Dickens, you might know, wrote this piece in his most Unitarian phase, after visiting prominent Unitarians in Boston and attending a Unitarian chapel in London. So these words of Scrooge's nephew, with which I'll close, serve as a Unitarian justification for the celebration of Christmas: "There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say," returned the nephew. "Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round -- apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that -- as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!"

And I say, God bless it, and God bless you all. When we separate the baby from the bathwater, there is still a baby in there worth celebrating. Amen.

## Readings

Luke 1

Magnificat

46 And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.  
51 He has shown strength with his arm;  
    he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
    and lifted up the lowly;  
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
    and sent the rich away empty.  
54 He has helped his servant Israel,  
    in remembrance of his mercy,  
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
    to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

## 1 Samuel 2

### The Song of Hannah

1 Hannah prayed and said,  
    "My heart exults in the LORD;  
    my strength is exalted in my God.  
    My mouth derides my enemies,  
    because I rejoice in my victory.  
2 "There is no Holy One like the LORD,  
    no one besides you;  
    there is no Rock like our God.  
3 Talk no more so very proudly,  
    let not arrogance come from your mouth;  
    for the LORD is a God of knowledge,  
    and by him actions are weighed.  
4 The bows of the mighty are broken,  
    but the feeble gird on strength.  
5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
    but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.  
    The barren has borne seven,  
    but she who has many children is forlorn.  
6 The LORD kills and brings to life;  
    he brings down to Sheol and raises up.  
7 The LORD makes poor and makes rich;  
    he brings low, he also exalts.  
8 He raises up the poor from the dust;  
    he lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
    to make them sit with princes  
    and inherit a seat of honor.  
    For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,  
    and on them he has set the world.  
9 "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,  
    but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
    for not by might does one prevail.

10 The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered;  
the Most High will thunder in heaven.  
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;  
he will give strength to his king,  
and exalt the power of his anointed."