

INCARNATIONS

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A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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A member of my Texas family recently sent me a video clip of an evangelism effort in the Houston area. The pastor and several members from a local church had taken over a busy intersection to spread the gospel to motorists stopped at the light and to pedestrians walking by. The video clip showed the evangelizers hard at work, buttonholing bystanders, thrusting leaflets into open car windows, and proclaiming to anyone who listened a message that combined condemnation and salvation: society is evil, human beings are likewise wicked and going to hell, unless we repent and trust Jesus.

Such focused, aggressive activity contrasts sharply with our own evangelistic style here at BUC (and in most Unitarian Universalist congregations). We keep things low-key, provide information without a sales pitch or pressure of any sort, leave you newcomers to your own devices, to make your way into the congregation (or not) at your own pace.

So as I watched the video clip, along with the accompanying e-mail message urging us all to proclaim God's word, I found myself wondering what would happen if I (or anyone of you who are part of this church) took over a street corner in Birmingham one afternoon and began to preach a classic UU message of tolerance, goodness, and freedom. "Brothers and sisters, sisters and brothers, God loves you! Did you know that? God loves you! And do you know why God loves you? Because you are good, that's why! All of you, from the day you were born until the day you die,

are infinitely good and decent people, unique, precious, and powerful. How could God not love you? You are the salvation of the world!”

How do you suppose such a message would be received?

My guess is that after an initial curiosity, listeners would begin turning away. The reason for the lack of enthusiasm would lie, I believe, in the greater power of the message delivered by the traditional evangelicals. Many of us resonate more powerfully to messages about our basic badness than about our basic goodness, liberal attitudes notwithstanding.

For the message that we are just not good enough, maybe far from good, is more pervasive, coming at us in the early years of life when parents scolded or spanked us, from the school systems which kept us carefully controlled lest we behave badly, from the society which imposes regulations on us to ensure that we do the right thing, eat the right thing, from the media which suggest that we need some product in order to be good enough, from people about us who assume we are untrustworthy, and from streetcorner evangelists who always seem to be around reminding us of our evil ways.

The message is very clear: we are not good. And if we require any proof of that fact, we need only look about us at all the bad in the world, bad which is our doing, the result of our actions. Given our history, preachers of badness, of the hopeless depravity of the human race, will always draw bigger crowds than preachers who bring a message of human goodness. And we help those preachers out on a regular basis when we yield to the easy criticism, the quick fault-finding that may seem a more ready response than any appreciation or gratitude.

This is the season of miraculous stories, perhaps abounding at this time because in the natural world the darkness is growing steadily longer, deeper, and humans need to hear about miracles in order to believe the darkness will eventually lift. We hear Hanukkah stories of lamps

burning far longer than a small amount of oil would have warranted; we hear Christmas stories of rare starlight, angels in the sky, and perhaps most curious, the birth of a deity in human form to a virgin mother.

A moment of focus on that virgin birth notion: ever since its appearance in sacred writings, that particular item has generated libraries of discussion, has created rifts in the Christian tradition that will likely never be healed, and has given rise to much harmful preaching about sexuality and relationship and embarrassment and bad jokes rather than offering any sort of helpful insight. Now it can be explained away as a scriptural mistranslation, with virgin more properly translated as young woman, certainly a term that would never have created all the problems that virgin has. But perhaps there was another rationale for that so-called mistranslation.

Go back to those streetcorner evangelists, who first claimed our attention not by offering us something wonderful or hopeful, but by damning us to hell. Their message, while simplified for streetcorner consumption, is central to much traditional religious teaching. We are damned to hell, so that reasoning goes, not for anything we did or did not do, but damned because of who we are, because of our essence, our core humanity which is fundamentally and irrevocably flawed, evil, sinful. This doctrine, the doctrine of original sin, dooms us from the moment we draw our first breath: we come into the world in a state of sin, already needing to be fixed, apparently because our primordial ancestors went awry and ruined things for all their descendants forevermore. Some traditions do softpedal this harsh view a bit, substitute milder language for the language of sin and damnation, suggest instead that we are “ignorant” or “forgetful” or “unenlightened.” But the perspective is the same: from the outset we are not right, we need fixing or correcting or

enlightening or redeeming or saving because as humans, we carry a bad seed, a nature that is fundamentally awry.

This teaching dovetails nicely with traditional interpretations of the virgin birth, since it affords a rationale for the story. Given humanity's flawed nature, any God or son of God could never be the product of human union; two sinners do not make a saint. So while a human womb seemed safe enough, the child gestating in that womb had to be a divine seed, not a human one, lest the child somehow be tainted with humanity's sinful essence. Hence we have all the stories in traditions of miraculous gods and goddesses coupling with humans to produce a divine child, a deity in human form that comes to us free of the essential brokenness of human nature.

Theologian and author Frederick Buechner, reflecting on the motif of the virgin birth, observes that "if you believe God is born in human form, it shouldn't make much difference to you how god got there. If you don't believe, it should make less difference still. In either case, life is complicated enough without confusing theology and gynecology" (Wishful Thinking, p. 118). Taking his point to heart, it may be that all our contortions and arguments about translation and stories about divine conception have led us down a road that either dead ends or has no end ever but continually circles back on itself. Perhaps a more useful perspective on the notion of virgin birth might be to consider what it says not about the divine nature of a God in human form, or about doctrine or theological gynecology, but instead to wonder at what it says to us about ourselves, about human nature. Virgin birth stories may be less stories of how deities come to us and more stories about our own coming into being and who we fundamentally are.

"The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation" (T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets). Many spiritual traditions have offered images, stories, and symbols pointing toward a divine element in human nature,

sometimes even alongside stories about our brokenness.

Somewhere, somehow, at the core of our beings, lies a connection to the ground of all being, to all that is powerful and meaningful and sacred. Unfortunately, this perception of the Divine Within, of Incarnation, the God inside us all, is only half understood and must be too complicated to maintain: so many spiritual traditions undermine or lose entirely this vision and retreat to a simpler teaching that insists on an utter, inviolable distinction between God and all humanity. The sacred dimension and the human dimension become walled off from one another, to be bridged only in rare instances by exceptional people like Jesus or Mohammed or Buddha, or a handful of saints and visionaries. Only these special cases deserve to be called incarnations, clear instances of the presence of divinity dwelling in human form.

But if virgin births and the gift of Incarnation are as much about what it means to be human as they are about the nature of any God, then each and every one of us carries a divine seed, the product of our origin as both human and mysteriously divine, brought into being by our parents and by the Spirit of Life working in tandem in much the same fashion that Mary, Joseph, the Holy Spirit, Krishna's mother Devaki and the god Vishnu, worked in tandem to bring Jesus and Krishna into being. Everyone here this morning, everyone outside this church, however wonderful, however terrible, bears the divine seed. Everyone is love incarnate and can lay claim to being God's very child. Everyone is another instance, another manifestation, of the sacred, of God become man, become woman, become child.

Such a doctrine may be risky, as it can sound blasphemous to streetcorner evangelists and anyone accustomed to the alternate notion that humans and gods are utterly and forever separate. Just imagine, say, if we recast some of our Christmas carols or readings to reflect a vision of the divine seed in all: "Joy to the world, for you and

you and you have come'; "Glory to God in the highest—and in the lowest"; "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son, a daughter, is given . . . and all their names shall be called Wonderful" Startling, is it not? Of course we cannot go around changing the language of Christmas carols, anymore than I can go claim a street corner in Birmingham and proclaim a gospel of human goodness, and expect results however skilled I become in the evangelistic preaching style.

Too much power has been invested in the traditional vision of badness for us to confront it head-on and hope to prevail.

But we can offer such a vision to the world one person at a time. We can live as Love Incarnate. We can tend that divine seed, inside us and inside everyone we meet, nurturing it, honoring it, providing it space to flower, enabling God to be born in each life. The gift of Incarnation is a profoundly healing message of worth and dignity and goodness.

Brothers and sister, sisters and brothers, in these times of growing darkness, when so much energy flows into visions of war and greed, we cannot begin our own street corner evangelizing too soon.