

ENDLESSLY INTERRUPTED

**A sermon given after the 2018 Holiday Insta-Pageant by
The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on
Sunday, December 23rd, 2018**

In order to stage the world premier of our first-ever All-Ages Holiday Insta-Pageant, we had to interrupt our regularly scheduled programming here at UU Wellesley Hills. The Christmas season is stretch when interruptions become fairly routine - in our churches, yes, and in our towns and workplaces and families and schools and local shops. A continuous series of scheduled and spontaneous celebrations can make December seem like an endurance event. Is really it the most wonderful time of the year? Or the most exasperating? These two emotional elements - wonder and exasperation - are combined in its origin story, the Nativity tales told across two gospels, of that surprising birth of Jesus. There each interruption is momentous.

The accounts in both gospels offer lessons in expecting the unexpected. Mary and Joseph alike learn of their unplanned pregnancy from angelic announcements, and then a sudden census calls the two of them out of Nazareth to the town of Bethlehem, where all those who came to register crowd the rooms at the inn. Whenever we look at an old-fashioned Christmas card like the one poet Ted Kooser describes, featuring “angel, manger, star, and lamb” gathers round a stable, the scene is carefully arranged and the commotion has

passed. All appears perfectly placid. Those “shepherds and wise men” have made their appointed arrivals, beckoned by “a multitude of the heavenly hosts” on one hand, and a “star at its rising” on the other hand. When we see such a classical tableau, we find satisfaction in everything being in such good order, quite post-partum and rather picturesque.

What we tend to forget is that Christmas from its inception has celebrated the chaotic. Here an impromptu pageant seems a much more accurate representation of its intent than a curated creche. Disruption begets disruption before and after Bethlehem, and what the First Nowell and every one since it had asked us to imagine is that the Divine might be disruptive, and the disruptive Divine. It reminds us of the that it matters a great deal how we respond to significant interruptions to our spiritual and communal lives. We have to be willing to suspend our standard procedures if we are to be truly ready for the season.

Even the carols that we sing ask us to entertain unlikely juxtapositions. With one breath, we speak of “the hopes and fears of all the years” meeting and mingling. They do, frequently, in our hearts and minds. The prospect of any substantive change involves hope and fear in various proportions of admixture. Anything newborn is capable of evoking those feelings simultaneously. Yet we yearn for Christmas itself to provide us a sense of continuity, year to year. For many of us today, Christmas and tradition have become synonymous. We keep singing the same songs and showing the same pictorials and telling the same stories, because we are over time, they have become familiar and dear to us. But the spirit of Christmas

should embolden us question conventions and discard them when necessary, just as Jesus himself did during his earthly existence.

Growing up, I attended a girl's school, and every December, it held an elaborate holiday recital that culminated with students in historic costume dress standing still against a finely painted backdrop as the lights rose on a Nativity scene up on our stage. Joseph, the Wise Men, the Innkeeper, the Shepherds - they were all in their correct places, and they were all played by schoolgirls. Even with that gauzy screen we hung the gymnasium, it was clear we had cross-cast Christmas. Educational circumstance dictated that artistic choice, but other circumstances dictates a lot of our choices. Whatever our situation, we have to be willing to assume some strange roles to get this holiday right. We have to heed a certain call to step out of ourselves.

“Be not afraid,” angels tell the shepherds. They have already told Mary and Joseph much the same. The angelic message is consistently this simple declaration: “Be not afraid”. Choose peace instead, or goodwill - that's what those angels say. Try not to resent interruptions, be they major or minor. Whenever our plans get scuttled, of course, we find it unsettling. But when I recall that motley assembly in Bethlehem with their improvised trips on camels and by donkey and with sheep, I realize that everyone there arrived with a willingness to be amazed and to encounter the sacred in their midst. Everyone wanted to come close. Whatever holiday plans we have this December, whether they keep us near or take us far, I think we probably harbor similar hopes for discovering the holy in the moment and in one other.

In his Christmas prayer, theologian and minister Howard Thurman asks for “gifts that are mine as the years are mine... the best of all good things for those I love; a fresh new trust for all whose faith is dim; the love of life, God’s precious gift in reach of all”. Very likely, the holiday gifts that you will receive this year will not resemble the ones you received last year or the ones you will receive next year, and here I am speaking of those gifts that matter the most, the intangibles of the season. May you be open in heart and mind to surprises, as well as requirements. Each Christmas ought to have an unrehearsed quality. Perhaps that is what makes any Christmas authentic. So take the time to volunteer in a pinch or respond to that urgent year-end appeal or drop off those latest donations or help neighbors with their lights or put out a festive place setting for a long-lost friend. Allow interruptions! Embrace them, even! ’Tis the season to hold even our fondest customs lightly.

*** * ***