

# This Charmed Moment

First, I want to thank my colleague, Michael Packard, for reminding me that today marks the 12<sup>th</sup> Night of Christmas, also called The Epiphany, for those who celebrate the Advent season. That was a really great story that he provided for our Time for All Ages!

An interesting fact about The Twelfth Night as a holiday.... It's not mentioned in the Gospels anywhere. According to Christian Historian and Methodist Minister Bruce Forbes, the period occurring between Christmas and the Epiphany was originally proclaimed "holy" by the Council of Tours in 567 CE. Some scholars have said that this occurred in order to better coordinate the Roman Julian calendar with the Lunar calendars of the East.

And, this makes sense. Each of the four canonical Gospels were written down with different audiences in mind. The Gospel of Luke, for example, which I read from aloud during the Christmas Eve service, was *intended* to be read aloud to a well-educated, largely Greek audience of early Christians. However, the Gospel of Matthew, the only canonical gospel to include the story of the Magi, was probably intended for a largely Jewish Christian audience who were trying to reconcile their new Christian faith with their Jewish tradition. The Greek word used in the text is *Magos* which likely means that the author is referring to members of the Old Persian class of *Avestan*, the caste in which the ancient Iranian spiritual leader, Zoroaster, was born. Scholars know this because *Magos* is used in other documents associated with the *Avestan* class. The audience would have known Persians from what is currently, Iran, probably had done business with them, and were no doubt very aware of their religious differences.

The story of the Magi baring gifts is some ways prophetic, because Zoroastrianism's dualistic cosmology of good vs. evil with an ultimate "end time" scenario of the forces of good finally prevailing becomes a central theme of Christian theology as expressed in the Book of Revelation, which, itself, builds upon Jewish prophetic apocalyptic themes appearing in, for example, the Book of Daniel.

However, the three gifts that the Magi are said to have brought, gold, frankincense and myrrh, are also interesting. My former American Baptist minister told me that this was an indication that Jesus was born to be "Lord over the Nations, the Churches, and would conquer Death itself." It is interesting how I can still remember *that* interpretation after all these years. But, a first century Jewish Christian would have recognized the phrase "gold, frankincense and myrrh" as the offering made by Seleucus I, the founder of the Seleucid Empire, to the Greek sun god, Apollo. This would have been especially meaningful for them because they had been waiting for their Messiah, who many hoped would deliver them from Roman rule the way that the Maccabees delivered previous generations from the Seleucid Empire. Basically, this part of the story would have been interpreted as "Even the Persians, even the *Seleucids* recognize that Jesus is the Messiah!" This becomes even more profound when one realizes that *both* gospels, both Luke and Matthew, were written *after* the Romans destroyed the Jewish Second Temple in 70 CE, so, the Jews that heard them were probably very traumatized individuals, or, at least, their parents were.

The reason that I bring all of this up is... you see? We all know the story of the Magi and the Three Gifts... but there is another story... a story that I learned in seminary, that is also, I feel, very interesting. The story of how one of the gospels was written to be performed orally, like a play, to educated Greeks, and another gospel included encoded references easily recognizable by traumatized messianic Jews... this fascinates me! It makes it more “real” to me... more “human”. It’s like the same story being told in both the Star Wars, and the Star Trek universes, and then we discover that there is also a third “making of” movie to see!

So, here we are... in 2020. Michael also mentioned to me the “pun” of 2020 and “perfect vision.” I’m not sure why that had to be pointed out to me, but, now, I can’t unsee it. 2020... perfect vision... the ability to see things clearly... as they are...

I entitled this sermon “This Charmed Moment” because, you know, the first week or so of the New Year *is* a kind of a “charmed moment”. There is this feeling of new beginnings, new starts. We’re cleaning up after our winter holiday parties and putting to use the gifts that we received. “Out with the old, and in with the new!” they say. I always start off my year by watching the Rose Parade in my pajamas while I eat my first breakfast of the year and drink my first cup of coffee.

A lot of people make New Years Resolutions. I don’t *think* I do, but then, I *did* decide that this year I would start going back to the gym and get another dog... although... not at the same time. The two things are not related...

However, it occurs to me... we are going to be seeing, writing, and saying “2020” a *lot* over this next year, and this, to me, seems like a golden opportunity...

... an opportunity to use this as a kind of a “gentle reminder” to take a moment to ask ourselves, “Am I really seeing this situation clearly? This there actually a ‘story behind the story’ that I may be missing?” Like the story behind the gospel story that I just told you. I don’t know about you all, but I am a person who can make some pretty quick decisions, but that doesn’t mean that I will stick to them no matter what. I am *always* open to new information, new ideas... and I think that is one of the hallmarks of a Liberal Religion such as ours. I think most Unitarian Universalists *do* like to learn new things and be open to new thoughts... like, Transcendentalism, for example! Or, like what I just did, by telling you some of the academic thinking around First Century Christianity.

By the way... my New Testament professor told those of us who were pursuing M.Div.s to “never, ever, use that in a sermon. “ But then, he wasn’t really familiar with Unitarian Universalism.

I think that one of the best things about being a Unitarian Universalist... and, one of the hardest to practice... is our 1<sup>st</sup> Principle: “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” It’s easy to say, but it’s very, very hard to put it into practice on a regular basis. I mean, many of us will participate in the “Black Lives Matter” social justice action this afternoon, and we really believe this, but what about the people who make rude gestures at us as they drive by? What do we do with them? How do we “frame” them in our own story?

This is what people do. We *all* do it, and it’s not a bad thing. We learn something about a person, place or thing when we are young, and then we apply what we have learned to all similar people, places or things. It has survival value. It’s a way to “fill in the blanks” when we

*don't* have all the information. When I was 6, I got bit by a fire ant in Albuquerque. Now I avoid fire ants...

... I also avoid Albuquerque, and maybe that isn't quite fair.

We all tend to avoid people who are different from us, especially if we think they might be dangerous. I was talking to a woman about a month ago who told me that one of the worse things for her African American husband is when he is standing on a street corner, waiting for a light, and a car pulls up to stop, then when they see him, they lock their doors. She said, he can hear the "thunk" of the doors locking, and it makes him feel awful. She said that he says "They don't know me... they don't know anything about me! And yet they feel like they have to be afraid of me!" This made me so sad when I heard it, because I thought of people who I know and who I care about, and I wondered if this happens to them, but they never talk about it.

I was talking to another woman who just learned that there were lists in existence of "Felon Friendly Businesses". In other words, businesses where people who have been convicted and incarcerated for felonies could find work after release. She took a picture of the list and put it on Facebook, as a warning to people, so that they would know who they were "doing business with". I asked her, what did she expect formerly incarcerated people to do? Somehow live without working? Doesn't that, I asked, pretty much, guarantee that they will get into trouble again?

But I tend to avoid people that I am likely not going to agree with... or, more precisely... people who are likely not to agree with me. I tend to use my "pick your battles" rule, because, I assume, I'm never going to change their minds, so what is the point of arguing?

Those people who made rude gestures at us the last time I participated in the Black Lives Matter action... I confess! I have made up an entire story about them in my head. And that story does not include their inherent worth and dignity.

So, I guess, maybe I *am* making a New Years resolution for 2020... I am resolving to "look harder" for the "whole story" ... to try to "see through" whatever is obscuring my vision. I am resolving to "try to make the *invisible*, visible".

Ok, so, maybe I'm not going to "change anybody's mind" ... but that may not be the point. Maybe the point is that I, myself, be the best Unitarian Universalist that I can be, and, how do I do that? By practicing, with great intent, and with focus and discipline, our Seven Principles, starting with the "inherent worth and dignity of every person".

Even people who don't agree with us.

Even people we don't like.

Even people we don't trust or believe.

Even people who don't like, trust, or believe *us*.

What is the worst thing that could happen? That we end up losing our own values? Trust me, no one has *ever* lost their values because they practiced their *own* values more fully.

- Joan DeArtemis, M.Div., UUSWH Intern Minister