

Home By Another Way
A Christmas Eve Reflection
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**READING: *The Stolen Infant*
By Carl Scovel**

The Unitarian Universalist minister Carl Scovel tells a story about the heating wars in his house, which at the time was the parsonage of King's Chapel, at 63 Beacon Street in Boston. In his recent book *Never Far From Home*, Scovel [who retired in 1999 after 30 years service as the UU minister at King's Chapel] explains that he grew up in a house without central heating. He writes:

I like to think that after 25 years of living together, our family has developed a certain sense of equilibrium, a certain ease with each other. From time to time, of course, differences arise and sometimes, momentarily an act of outright rebellion. But as the reigning benevolent despot of 63 Beacon St, as I sometimes fancy myself, I like to think that by and large we get on very well. There are differences, as I said, continuing differences such as just how warm the house should be.

I grew up in a house without central heating and I have always felt that a cool house is a healthy house, impervious to colds and conducive to the flow of blood. My daughters do not share that sentiment and at times become articulate upon the point. Last Christmas when I refused to turn up the heat sufficiently high to raise a winter's supply of orchids, the youngest daughter proclaimed, "Behold a decree went out of Carl Augustus that all the world shall be frozen, and each went to her own room to be frozen." "Nonsense," I replied, "You're much better off here than if you were living in China or Russia." I don't recall her precise response, but she intimated that my argument was moot. Something in her tone of voice suggested that the matter was not settled.

That Christmas eve we held our traditional services of song and scripture, and we added a small new feature. On the old communion table we placed a crèche—terra cotta figures of Mary, Joseph, the Babe, shepherds, sheep and kings as well. We had never had a crèche in King's Chapel before and I felt that if we were to introduce one, the muted colors of these terra cotta figures might alleviate any Puritan objections.

We went through the family service at 4:30 p.m. and Holy Communion at 6:00 and the big service at 10:30 p.m., and I heard nothing but words of appreciation. I was relieved and thought perhaps we'd started a new tradition. I had finished greeting the crowd after the late service when our [sexton] approached me with a worried look and said, "I think you'd better come down to the [front of the church]."

"Why, what's the matter, Tom?" I asked.

"One of the pieces of the crèche has been stolen," he said to me.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Well, it's [Jesus]." he answered.

"Oh Lord," I thought, "The first time we put it out and [someone takes a piece. I hope this doesn't mess things up for the next three hundred years.]"

As we walked down the aisle of the church I couldn't help wondering who would take such a piece. A drunk? A nut? An objector? A prankster?

We got to the chancel and looked at the crèche and sure as shooting the baby was gone. I looked under the table and around the chancel floor. Nothing. Then I saw that someone had placed a piece of paper under the figure of Mary. I drew it out and found the following message, printed neatly in pencil. "We've got Jesus. Turn up the heat at 63 Beacon Street and we'll return him for the morning service."

The heat went up at the parsonage, the infant reappeared and everything returned to normal. Well, not quite. The benevolent despot of 63 Beacon Street sits less certainly upon his throne. That is not surprising. No monarch, indeed no despot, can ever be so sure of his rule after a child has been born.

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We gather together tonight, on this midwinter night, to honor and celebrate the birth of love and the return of light into our lives. This is a holy night, honored in many places and in many ways, often telling the same stories each year or sharing the same readings and singing the same songs. Though some may question the meaning, it is a ritual of remembering and honoring, like an annual uttering of a meditation chant, repeated on the breath as part of the life flow in and out of our bodies, in and out of our lungs.

The stories of the birth of Jesus come to us from only two of the gospels, Matthew and Luke. I've often heard secular critics scoff at the birth stories, especially the virgin birth, as superstitious and factually impossible. But to argue about their relevance based on historical accuracy is to miss the point.

If we examine them closely, we see that the two birth stories are quite different, even contradictory. Luke says that shepherds are the only ones who visit the baby Jesus. Matthew says that magi – an unarticulated number and no kings – are the only ones who visit the baby Jesus. Luke never mentions a star, but just says it was an angel choir that told the shepherds about the birth of Jesus. Matthew is the one who says there was a star.

In addition, there is uncertainty about where Jesus was born. Luke says Mary had to give birth in a stable because there was no room at the inn. Yet Matthew never mentions a stable. Matthew says the magi "set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was... On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage."

How can all this be? Why do we conflate the two gospel stories as if they were one? Why do we tell the nativity story as though it were an unbroken narrative rather than two distinct stories? How can this faith of Christianity be legitimate if these stories are not actually, historically, accurate?

These questions, however, do not address the purpose of the stories. These questions arise from a notion about historical accuracy based on the scientific method, an approach that arose only through the Enlightenment, some 1500 years after the gospels were written. Instead, if we want to discover the purpose of these stories we must ask the questions, from those who wrote them and for those who read them now, about how these stories make meaning.

In their book, *The First Christmas*, the great liberal Christian theologians, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, suggest that the birth stories we find in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are parables similar to the teachings Jesus used later in his life. In a parable, such as the Good Samaritan, we are not concerned whether or not the story is historically accurate. The point of a parable is to share a truth about human experience and existence.

The author of the book of Matthew – through the telling of his entire gospel story – makes the argument that Jesus is the new Moses. Through parallels between the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, we may divine a deeper understanding about the complexity of the story. But again, what is the meaning of this story, and what relevance does it have for us?

Jesus was born into a time of trouble. Rome was an empire, and an occupying force in Judea. The Jewish King Herod was a puppet of Rome. When King Herod discovered – after talking with the magi – that a newborn child might threaten his status as ruler, he told the magi to look diligently for the child, and then return to him and tell him where the child was so that he could also pay homage to the baby. But really, he wanted to kill the baby. In fact, when the magi don't return to him (because they were warned in a dream not to), King Herod orders all male babies in the area to be killed. Fortunately for the sake of the story, Mary and Joseph and Jesus escape.

To look at ourselves somewhat objectively, it is not much of a leap to see that the United States, similar to ancient Rome, is now a global empire and an occupying force in many other countries around the world. It is both frightening and invigorating to imagine the threat that a prophetic child of peace may bring to our global *status quo*. As Carl Scovel light-heartedly, but truthfully, relates in his story about the stolen ceramic Jesus, “No monarch, indeed no despot, can ever be so sure of his rule after a child has been born.”

The magi who come to honor Jesus at his birth also understand the danger a prophetic child of peace may bring to the world. After they have a revelation about King Herod's secret desire to kill the infant, the magi do not return to speak to him. They go home by another way.

“Home” is a powerful and meaningful place. Especially at this time of year we are reminded of its power and meaning. Students return home from college. Grown children bring their children home to meet the grandparents. Airports and bus stations and train terminals are packed with travelers – many of them stranded this year – all doing their best to find their way home.

Other people wander in the wilderness of the soul, deeply unhappy or full of shame about where they are in life, but don't know what else to do. These people seek an emotional home. And I am reminded of my work years ago with foster teenagers, and I was always amazed by how even when they came out of those abusive families, one of the greatest rewards for the teenagers was to go home and be reunited with their parents.

For some people, a physical home is no longer an option. A husband or wife may have died, or it may be that home life with family has gotten so dysfunctional and difficult that it is less painful to stay away than it is to be home. Even for us as a congregation, in our first attempt to purchase land and relocate, we were denied one opportunity to build a new home. But we are fortunate in that we at least already have a physical home. According to Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners – a primary local social service organization – over 900 families in the western suburbs are literally homeless.

King Herod still exists today. Every night that hope and love and peace are born, they are born into a world filled with forces ready to eliminate and destroy that hope and love and peace. The magi, aware of these destructive forces and paying attention to their wise revelations, discover that they must “go home by another way.”

Tonight we honor and celebrate the birth of hope and love and peace. We cradle these dreams in the humble shelter of skin and bones. We work and pray for peace in Iraq and Afghanistan, in Israel and India. We work and pray for hope and change in our own country. We work and pray for compassion to live and thrive in our hearts. These dreams, like the messages that Jesus brings, are subversive by their very nature of challenging the *status quo*. These dreams, like the law and the prophets Jesus says he has come to fulfill, are not fulfilled because they are easier to attain than the *status quo*, but because they are more difficult.

Hope and love and peace are born tonight, and they face the constant threat of extinction. If we want our dreams to survive in the face of all these threats, whether we seek a physical place or spiritual awareness, we must find another way home. On this journey we may learn stamina and flexibility, humility and strength.

A child of peace reminds us of our highest aspirations. A child of peace reminds us to challenge the status quo. A child of peace reminds us, if we are to succeed, of the compassion that must accompany such challenges. A child of peace reminds us, as we encounter King Herod over and over again, that hope and love and peace constantly must be born and re-born for us to find our way home.

Love [is] the prophet's only word
The only lesson left to learn
The only end of heaven's work
And [is] the only road that goes there.

(From Peter Mayer's song, "Stables")