

HOMILY Dec. 18, 2011

“What Child Is This?”

Two or three weeks ago, in a rare somewhat impulsive act, I read this page (holding it up) in the newspaper, ripped it out and immediately went to my dresser in the bedroom. I found a leather pouch holding assorted old coins, including several silver dollars. I'd wondered for many years if they had any special value beyond their stamped denominations. I laid them out and studied their dates, checking this page to discover if I had hit pay dirt. The Peace dollar, caught my eye for it was said to be worth up to \$3,000. But especially the Morgan silver dollar, listed up to \$100,000, spiked my blood pressure a bit. Each bore a woman's profile, above one “Liberty” and the other “E Pluribus Unum.” I found no evidence of the words “peace” or “Morgan” on the coins so I didn't start visualizing how I might spend some sudden gain in spendable wealth.

I went first to a neighborhood coin dealer, atop the north hill on Division. It seemed to be a place where I could get a more reliable offer. The young man who helped me rang up a total, judging each coin and referring to a book showing the number of coins of that denomination struck that year. He summed up a total on his computer, I thanked him for his assistance and headed west up the Sunset Highway to the Hampden Inn where a traveling coin-buying organization had set up shop. Near the front desk in a side hallway was a row of chairs against the wall. Eight persons were waiting, men and women. After a while a man appeared from somewhere and started self-conscious banter with his wife about the wait, expressing some anxiety about what their coins were worth, and then joked about finally finding them in a bag under the sink in their bathroom.

He approached me with his newspaper page and showed me the \$100,000 possibility, asking, “Did you see that.? See this coin—doesn’t it look the same?” With a somewhat mischievous balloon-pricking tone I said, “It looks just like mine except I didn’t find MINE in the bathroom.” Fortunately, he laughed and others started talking, instead of waiting silently for someone to leave the room and a dealer to come out and invite the next customer to come in. None of the people leaving spoke as they passed by. It was like trying to judge a jury as they file back into a courtroom.

The man with the bag of silver from his bathroom was the first man to break the silence, the only one to display his expectations, almost childlike.

And here we are right in the midst of the prime season of expectations, of waiting with anticipation. Children are not alone in dreaming, in receiving or giving. Some dreams will be favored. Others may have to be modified. Still others will be dashed. For some people, expectations have been found to be foolhardy and so they don’t indulge.

Still early in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, commercialization of the holiday season usually involves gifts and that means buying and spending. Expectations in the first century of the Common Era were quite different. For the 99 percent of the day, needs focused more on food than frills. Guess what percentage of years among the past 2,000 have frills been more important than food supplies. Of course, too many still today spend days at a time underfed.

But shortage of food is not the only need. Many times the need is for delivery—and I don’t mean arrival of the UPS truck, or for the Lottery to reward your righteousness.

Many religions express this need and anticipation as waiting for a messiah who will bring a new wave of justice and blessing overflowing the land—eliminating all evil.

In Judaism, the expectation of a messiah has been recorded in Hebrew scripture since the very beginning. It is said that belief in a messiah is one of the main requirements for Jewish belief. The messiah will gather the exiles, restore religious courts of justice, end all wickedness, sin and heresy, reward the righteous, rebuild Jerusalem, restore the line of King David, and restore the Temple service. Some believe there is a potential messiah in every generation. A story from the Talmud tells of a rabbi who found the Messiah at the gates of Rome and asked, “When will you finally come?” The answer was, “Today.” The man waited all day and returned later distraught and confused. He said, “You said messiah would come today but he didn’t come. What happened?” The Messiah replied, “Scripture says, ‘Today’ if you will but hearken to His voice.”

Hinduism apparently pre-dates Judaism and lists as 25 avatars, or incarnations as messiahs. The Kalki Purana combines elements of all the others and has power to change of course of time to bring about goodness. The presence of an avatar indicates a descent of the divine awareness into the mundane world.

Muhammad, founder of Islam, lived 570-632 CE. I read the section from the Qur’an stating what to many of us may be an unexpected affirmation of the Christian designation of Jesus as Messiah. A hadith, or commentary, quotes The Prophet Muhammad: “There is no prophet between me and him, that is, Jesus. He will descend (to the earth). . .He will fight for the cause of Islam. He will break the cross, kill the swine, and put an end to war. . .God will perish all religions except Islam. He (Jesus)

will destroy the Antichrist who will live on the earth for 40 days and then he will die. The Muslims will pray behind him.” No one but God knows when this second coming and world-shaking event is to happen.

Buddhist belief, somewhere between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, spoke of a bodhisattva named Maitreya as an expected messiah.

Zoroastrians believed that Saoshyant would bring about the final renovation of the world, this arising in Peria, now Iran, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century before the Common Era.

Li Hong was a messianic figure in Taoist eschatology, prophesied to appear at the end of the world cycle.

Baha'u'llah, founder of the Baha'i faith, claimed to be the messiah prophesied in various world religions. He lived from 1817 to 1892.

Theosophists, in New York City, also in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, believed a messiah would become manifest sometime in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and would represent all the messiahs expected by any religions before.

As I summarized this list, it struck my funny bone how much it resembles the assertions coming these days out of a presidential nomination debate. Pick this one. No, not that one. Well, perhaps another will suddenly appear.

But expectations for a better future are serious issues, not to be dismissed easily. I remind you of the Superman sermon I delivered about 18 months ago, as we entered final stages of the search for a new minister—our deep hope to find just the right person at the right time. We didn't use the word messiah, but our angst at the time was very real, deservedly so.

Today, however, we gather predominantly within the Judeo-Christian tradition, primarily the latter. Ironically, for as much as the Jews had anticipated a messiah from the line of David, nearly two generations passed before known recorded mentions of Jesus' life saw the light of day. The earliest known Christian writings were by Paul, who wrote only of Jesus' resurrection and its meaning, not of a living, breathing person. The oldest of the four gospels, Mark, paid no attention to Jesus' birth or genealogy, even if he knew of it, because for him Jesus' significance began only after his baptism by John the Baptist.

The writers of Matthew and Luke, independently, decided to add an account of Jesus' birth, an immaculate conception of Mary by God. How else could one explain the magnificence of Jesus without such beginnings? Matthew and Mark's reasoning, and that of their audiences, was trapped by the same worldview—only the supernatural could produce such a gift. Thus the nativity story evolved down through generations until it has become almost an afterthought to the big event—Christmas!!!

The writer of the Gospel of John went further in envisioning Jesus' cosmic birth and role by avoiding the nativity scene altogether. He began his gospel this way: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. . ."

One of the readings presented earlier was the Gospel of Thomas. Scholars had known of such a gospel for many years but no text was found until 1945, just a year or so before the Dead Sea Scrolls, also known as the Qumran texts. They were discovered rolled up in stone jars in a cave in the Judean desert, between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. The Gospel of Thomas text, however, was among 52 different texts found near the

town of Nag Hammadi, located in Upper Egypt. Muhammad Ali al-Samman and his brothers went digging on Jabal al-Tarif, a mountain honeycombed with more than 150 caves, some used as grave sites as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty, or some 4,300 years ago. Digging around a massive boulder, they hit a red earthenware jar, almost a meter high. Thinking it might contain gold, Ali smashed the jar and discovered 13 papyrus books, bound in leather.

In addition to the Gospel of Thomas: the collection includes the Gospel of Phillip (which has that fascinating passage that complains, Why is Jesus always kissing Mary Magdalene and why does he love her more than us disciples?), Gospel of Truth, Gospel to the Egyptians, the Secret Book of James, the Apocalypse of Paul, the Letter of Peter to Philip, and the Apocalypse of Peter. Nearly all of these texts, writes author Elaine Pagels, come under the category of gnosticism. Orthodox Jews and Christians insist there is chasm separating humanity from its creator; God is wholly other. On the other hand, says Pagels, “Some of the Gnostics who wrote these gospels contradict this: self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical.” Dr. Pagels helped prepare the first complete edition of the Nag Hammadi texts in English, in 1977, after 32 years of “personal rivalries and . . . pretensions to monopolize documents that belong only to science, that is to say, to all.”

It may be no surprise that these texts, although known of, were not found until 1945. And also, no wonder it took 30 years for them to be cleared for publication. Pagels contends that Gnosticism and other non-orthodox viewpoints were contrary to the orthodox majority favoring Christianity as an institutional religion, and that understanding of Jesus be filtered through a hierarchy of priests and bishops.

The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings. There is no narrative or other commentary on what Jesus said. The words said to have been said by Jesus stand on their own without elaboration. For me, their value is that they disturb me, they roil the water so that I don't rely on any easy answers. And in this way, they fit in comfortably with UU principles—or is it that UUs fit in comfortably with Jesus/Gnostic thinking? Does that disturb you?

I know what disturbs me a lot, namely that there are people who perpetuate the idea of a messiah coming in some “end time” as a judge of the people, us people. Of course, that expectation of judgment refers to people other than themselves. It is not Jesus language.

I'm confident that Jesus would adore any child, of any age. This man who gained high regard and stature as a prophet repeatedly elevated childlike qualities as those required to recognize heaven, or God, or paradise, or peace, or . . . you fill in the blanks.

Later this morning, children of all ages of this church will present the Christmas pageant, written for use in Unitarian Universalist churches. They will not only dramatically present but actually BE living testament to the innocence and enthusiasm and fresh insight and new hopes that older folk so longingly admire. May this realization cement our commitment regarding every birth the same as that birth in a Bethlehem manger. May we allow our children to open our hearts to the potential for a spirit of peace with transcends all that we have known, that expands our greatest expectations. Peace be with us, and with everyone everywhere. Amen.

