

December 22, 2013
Claire Feingold Thoryn
4th Sunday in Advent

Reading: “You Be Glad at That Star” by Clarke Dewey Wells

Several years ago and shortly after twilight our 3 1/2 year old tried to gain his parents’ attention to a shining star.

The parents were busy with time and schedules, the irritabilities of the day and other worthy pre-occupations. “Yes, yes, we see the star – now I’m busy, don’t bother me.” On hearing this the young one launched through the porch door, fixed us with a fiery gaze and said, “You be glad at that star!”

I will not forget the incident or his perfect words. It was one of those rare moments when you get everything you need for the good of your soul – reprimand, disclosure and blessing. It was especially good for me, that surprising moment, because I am one who responds automatically and negatively to the usual exhortations to “pause-and-be-more-appreciative-of-life.” Fortunately, I was caught grandly off guard.

Here ends the reading.

Sermon: Shine

I have a very particular image of what the manger and stable look like in the Christmas story. I grew up as a Unitarian Universalist, at Cedar Lane UU Church in Bethesda, Maryland. When I was in first grade, the congregation used a Sunday School curriculum called “Haunting House” where we explored the different meanings of the word “home” and what different houses can look and feel like.

We started with our first home, our mother's wombs, and moved towards the Christmas story as winter approached. As we imagined Jesus' home in the manger, we were given the opportunity to create animals for the church's manger scene that would be displayed on Christmas Eve.

Perhaps what I *should* say is that our parents were given the opportunity to become very skilled in using an Exacto knife, because these animals were made out of large pieces of cardboard that first graders couldn't cut. There were some big patterns for us to trace, paint, and decorate: sheep, horses, cows.

Over time, as you might imagine in a UU church, the original animal patterns were expanded upon. Soon, joining the horses and sheep were elephants, peacocks, foxes, giraffes. One year I remember a particularly large killer whale, worshipping Jesus at the manger.

And thus I learned that the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and the killer whale shall lie down with the giraffe.

Last Sunday here at Follen we celebrated our Christmas pageant. As I now know, there are no animals in Follen's manger scene, but there are a lot of angel's voices in the form of robed junior and youth choir members. There was also one angel I found especially cute....not that I'm biased.

The writer Sue Monk Kidd, who wrote *The Secret Life of Bees*, has a story about her daughter's part in their church's pageant. She writes:

When my daughter was small she got the dubious part of the Bethlehem star in a Christmas play. After her first rehearsal she burst through the door with her costume, a five-pointed star lined in shiny gold tinsel designed to drape over her

like a sandwich board. “What exactly will you be doing in the play?” I asked her.

“I just stand there and shine,” she told me. I’ve never forgotten that response.¹

Christmas is our chance to just stand there and shine. In the Christmas story we are reminded of the gift of our beautiful, vulnerable bodies, and that we are all worthy of love and care, right from the start.

For so the children come.
No angels herald their beginnings.
No prophets predict their future courses.
No wisemen see a star to show where
to find the babe that will save humankind.
Yet each night a child is born is a holy night.

“You be glad at that star!” said the little boy.

Sometimes, we are so busy, or sad, or anxious, or worried, that we don’t feel we can be glad at that star. We compare our messy interiors with everyone else’s bright and shiny exteriors. Our house doesn’t feel like a home. Sometimes everyone else’s joy only makes our sadness grow stronger. We don’t feel loved, loveable, or loving. Those are the days we don’t think we have it in us even to just stand there and shine.

Here is a story about one of those days. This book, *A Girl Named Zippy*, is my favorite memoir ever. It is by Haven Kimmel and is the story of her childhood in the late 60s and early 70s. Her nickname was Zippy because she zipped around. She grew up in a small town in Indiana, and when I say small town, I mean 300

¹ From *Spiritual Literacy*, by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, 446-447

people. Total. Her whole town had about the same number of people as belong to this church.

Her family doesn't have much. In the long cold Indiana winters they can only afford to heat one room in the house, the small den, and that is where the family sleeps, on couches and cots. Their tree is a ragged tinsel table-topper they bring out each year and put in the freezing cold living room.

Santa brings Zippy one present each year. One year's gift, a fluffy dog with a music box inside, is documented in a sequence of pictures:

first, little four year-old Zippy is holding the fluffy dog, obviously thrilled;

in the next her sister is holding it, examining the dog, and Zippy has her head cocked, confused;

in the last the dog is completely gone and she is playing with the box it came in. She has just finished sneezing, and the fur of the dog, which came off in handfuls when touched, is lying all around her on the floor.

Despite these iffy experiences Zippy is always grateful for her gift, because her father told her that when he was young, he didn't have toys. Her father tells her something that perhaps a parental figure has told you, at some point in your life—or perhaps you have found yourself saying these very words: “I was happy just to get an orange.”

Haven Kimmel writes:

... I have since discovered that all men of a certain age tell this story, and they give themselves away by always

using the same fruit. I have yet to meet the father who will look his child in the eye and say, “I was happy just to get some seedless grapes.” But whatever the motive for this generational fiction, it works. So what if my stuffed dog molted and gave me an upper respiratory illness? At least Santa had remembered me...

So the next Christmas, knowing she has one chance to make this present count, she lays it all out on the line. Zippy asks Santa for a piano.

...It was all I could think about: a piano, a piano, a piano. ...[T]his desire... went straight to my heart.... I wanted the piano more than life itself, but I had also asked Santa for a doll with two buttons—one that made it be a real baby and one that turned it back into a doll. I was gambling: if I didn’t get the piano at least I’d get a real baby, and then I’d have something to live for.

My piano obsession was written in worry lines all over my parent’s faces. I figured they were worried about where we’d put it. I assured them I’d be happy to give up my cot and sleep inside the piano if necessary, but they said nothing.

I told them we could put it in the living room and I would cut all the fingertips out of my gloves and play it there. Silence. ...It seemed that nobody was holding out any hope for this one.

On Christmas Eve...I felt my stomach turn over with dread. ...What if Santa was actually mad at me for asking him to carry such a thing as a piano all the way from the North Pole?

Zippy has a good friend from school named Rose, and her parents are decidedly more well off than Zippy's. Every year they have a magnificent party on Christmas Eve.

So that Christmas Eve night, Zippy and her parents walk to the party at Rose's house. Before they get there, Zippy's mother turns to her and says gently, "No matter how much it hurts, try to be gracious, sweetheart." And then they arrive into the "heat and beauty and bounty" of Rose's house. Rose's house is warm—in every room. The dining room is filled with a feast—including a whole basket of oranges. Their tree is real, it stands on the floor and reaches the ceiling, and there are so many presents they are simply "scattered about" on the floor underneath it.

Haven Kimmel remembers: "It is an amazing moment, when one goes from being grateful for what one has to longing for what is impossible."

And then Rose grabs her by the hand and drags her upstairs to show her the early Christmas presents she has already unwrapped.

And what do you think she had? ...A piano.

Well, more like a tabletop keyboard, with only two octaves, but as Zippy says,

It might as well have been a piano.

I wondered if it would still work if I threw up on it.

Zippy is gracious. She plays the piano while her friends sing and she refuses to cry.

Snow begins to fall heavily, and her father walks home to retrieve their truck, so that Zippy and her mother don't have to trudge back home in the snow. At the end of the night, as they get into her

father's truck, Zippy is stoic in her despair. She thinks:

So my best friend got the one thing I wanted most, the one thing I would never have? So what if when she woke up in the morning there would be presents spread so far out across the floor the children would have to begin opening presents in the hallway? What was all this to me?

They arrive home to their cold house. In the living room, they can see their breath. Zippy starts to run straight from the freezing room to the warm den, but her father stops her and points her towards their Christmas tree.

She writes:

And there, in front of our sweet little tree, stood a piano. Not a church-size piano, but one much, much bigger than Rose's. It stood on *legs*. It had its own *bench*. It had probably four octaves, and three music books. And propped up on the music stand was a letter, written in big, loopy handwriting that could only come from a very shy, very strange man:

Dear Child:

I hope you don't mind that I delivered this a day early, but I thought you might like to have it tonight. I'm sorry I can't also bring you the doll, but to be honest, no one has ever before made such a request. My elves are working on it, but it might be a long time before we get it just right.

Thank you for not losing faith. Thank you for being so brave tonight.

*Love,
Santa*

Some Christmases, we don't get the piano.
But some Christmases, we do.

So this Christmas, be glad at that star.

Just stand there and shine.

Know that God has loved you right from the start,
And will love you always.

For each night a child is born is a holy night,
and you were once a child.

Amen.