

Prince of Peace

*A sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon
Delivered at the UU Church of Columbia
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This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war and hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out and the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn—
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn –
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

The first time I read this Christmas poem by Madeleine L'Engle, years ago, I was stunned.

This is not the Christmas I knew about – the Christmas of fuzzy sheep and humble shepherds. The Christmas of love and cookies and presents.

This is not the sanitary Christmas that allows us to sit comfortably on our deep couches with our egg-nog in hand.

This is the Christmas that asks something of us. The Christmas of radical risk and courage and impossible hope. A simple and miraculous story of a birth in a time and place of fear and danger.

It was no time for a child to be born, his family homeless, his mother barely thirteen, his father confused and upset. His ancestral lands occupied by the Roman Empire, the hopes of an entire nation resting on his tiny shoulders.

For the people of Israel expected their Messiah to be a king. A warrior prince who would grow to win back their lands, their justice, and their peace – a king, as the prophet Isaiah predicted, who would break the yoke of oppression and rule forevermore in continual and growing authority.

This was the wild expectation of the Christ. And the people of Israel believed it so strongly that King Herod became afraid and set out to destroy the child – threatened by the fierce hope this simple birth had unleashed.

It was no time for a child to be born, as Herod sought this Prince who eluded his grasp. For as Mary and Joseph and the babe escaped to Egypt, the peaceful little town of Bethlehem was visited with terror.

On Christmas Eve, we tend to end the story with the visit of the wise men and their departures to their own countries, but remember it didn't stop there.

Only three verses later, after the holy family escapes to Egypt to avoid Herod's murderous intent, we hear this in Matthew 2:16-18:

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: □'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, □Rachel weeping for her children; □she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

That was no time for a child to be born. That time when the lives of children were sacrificed to the power of empire.

Yet Love still took the risk of birth and the God of Israel came to earth in stunning paradox.

His people had prayed for a warrior, for a king. They were given a child. A tiny infant child who would grow to become a great teacher.

Who would grow to teach a radical truth – that blessed are the meek and the hungry. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers.

In a time of violence and oppression. In a time of despair and fear. God came as a child. God came as a teacher.

That's been on my mind this week. A source of constant reflection as our nation has mourned the violent deaths of children and teachers.

What does it mean that God came as a child, as a teacher?

What does that mean when tragedy in Newtown has reminded us of children born amid violence all over the world – children killed in China and Afghanistan, children walking violent streets to school every single day in every one of our inner cities.

This is no time for a child to be born... this time when the lives of our children are sacrificed still to our culture of violence.

When it takes a massacre of children in a mostly white New England town for our lawmakers to even begin a serious conversation about guns ...

When violence in homes and on our community's most under-served streets are shrugged off as, simply, the way things are...

When civilians are killed in our name by drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan...

This is no time...

But when is? Love does not wait for the right time. It is born among us whether we are prepared or not.

It is born again in the faces of children
It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they walk into their sunsets.
It spreads around the earth. Brightening all things,
Even hate which crouches breeding in dark corridors.

Miraculously, Love always takes the risk of birth. And it asks something of us.

We read of the lowly birth, the flight to Egypt, the slaughter of innocents. Amid all of that, what does it mean to believe that God came not as a King but as a child, not as a warrior, but as a teacher?

In *our* culture, so full of violence and fear, what does it mean to proclaim that every night a child is born is a holy night, and that holiness does not end with birth? What would it mean for our lives to organize themselves around that truth?

Mother Teresa once said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." Every child born is our child, and that belonging continues at least unto death.

For we who believe in the perpetual birth of universal Love in this world, there is no severing the ties of kinship we share with all of creation.

Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the merciful. Who know that the shepherds are our kin, and so is the murderous king. Those twenty children were our children, and so was Adam Lanza. We failed them all with a culture scarce in compassion.

In the wake of our most current violent awakening, we can talk about gun control, we can talk about mental health care, we can talk about violent video games and the military industrial complex. But we will not be transformed through the channels of empire.

We will be changed by the dusty barn and the homeless teenage mother.

By remembering how we belong to each other, humble and wholly human. All of us violent, all of us peaceful.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

That heaven-born Prince of Peace, the child who would grow to be a teacher, commanded his followers to become Peacemakers.

And it was no safe call to conference table conflict resolution.

It was the call to BE LOVE, born onto this earth. Be love to *every* neighbor – the tax collector and the prostitute, the homeless and addicted man, the stranger wrapped in clouds of despair.

We will find peace at last when we understand our belonging in every abandoned place, bringing healing in the form of kinship and love.

We may none of us be princes of peace. But we have all been the child; we can all be the teacher, loving our neighbor and knowing ourselves beloved.

For now is the time for love to be born. We cannot wait, as time runs out and the sun burns late.

Now is the time for love to be born. We have no other time.

And love is willing. By some miracle, Love still takes the risk of birth. In the projects, in our homes, in Afghani poppy fields, in the dusty barns. Yes, love is willing.

Are we?

This is a Christmastide of risk, and courage, and impossible hope.

Merry Christmas, everyone.