

## TIDINGS OF TRUE JOY

The ongoing theme of the talks you hear me give in here has to do with who we are and how we are to live, matters of identity and destiny. We are seeking to do this in the evolving cosmos rather than in some idealized formerly held world view.

You've heard these same words, identity and destiny, put differently.

First, in the prayer of St. Francis: God, who are you? God, who am I?

These questions are a more personalized form of the questions that shaped Jewish faith: Who are we and how are we to live?

I am convinced that if we work in our spiritual practice to gain clarity about and answer these questions, that work will contribute to our transformation.

I am also convinced that a handful of people who are in the process of being transformed by peace, love, joy and patience can transform the world. That's peace, love, joy and patience. "Patience" is the word I'm using for being non-reactive or non-judgmental.

I believe, further, that religion and religious rituals will be part of this transformative process. But, this will not be sectarian.

An example of a religious prayer/poem expressive of this transformation and written by such a transformed person is this:

Give me, Oh God,  
Deep thoughts  
High Dreams  
Few Words  
Much Silence  
The narrow path  
The wide outlook  
The end in peace

Amen.

- Hazrat Inayat Khan

I wanted you to have this.

Hazrat Khan was a Sufi mystic, 1882 - 1927. His primary theme was divine unity and his teachings focused on love, harmony and beauty. One of the things he taught was that blind adherence to any book rendered religion devoid of spirit.

Over the past several years I have become more and more convinced that what other spiritual teachers and theologians within the Christian tradition are saying is true. Namely, that if the movement that alleges to follow Jesus doesn't recover the mystical dimension of its faith and the power of its myths, it may well be done for. Richard Rohr said last fall that the evangelical support of the political right will be an indictment against its validity as a Christian movement for generations to come. David Brooks, the conservative columnist said much the same thing in an opinion piece this week.

Someone sent me a sign that was in front of a church in Alabama. When I first saw this, I thought surely it must be photo-shopped. Nope. It made the national news.

Please understand: the teachings of the Jewish mystic Jesus are very political. These teachings are, for example, decidedly on the side of justice for those most in need of it - the powerless and the disposed. This, however, is not the politics of division. There is no future in that.

Just this week, while working on this talk, I read a news article in one of the religious journals I take that reported on the Southern Baptists in the state of Tennessee, this is my "mother church" as it were, deciding to sever ties with a church that had called a woman to be its senior pastor because, spokespeople for the denomination said, "the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

There are two major blocks, there may be many more but these are the ones I run into all the time, to people participating in the evolving spiritual transformation that is a part of our cosmos. These blocks are “organized religion” and “religious illiteracy.”

I’m not going to take the time to unpack the religious part of this today. Religion and religious ritual are things humans are hard-wired to experience and express.

But, the religion I have in mind has to be a religion that knows about and participates, with openness, in the evolving nature of the cosmos. The religion of “right belief,” the religion of division does not contribute to any person’s transformation. I’ve quoted Karl Rahner in here before: “In the days ahead, you will either be a mystic (one who has experienced God for real) or nothing at all.”

My introduction into mystical spirituality and non-dual mind theology did not at first come to me through any Christian teachers but, rather, from Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufism. I can now, because of people like Thomas Merton, Ilia Delio, Jim Finley and others you have heard me frequently mention in here, see clearly Jesus as the first non-dual spiritual teacher in the West.

I am not implying that what the Buddhists, Hindus and Sufis are after is the same as what Jesus followers are after. Buddhists want to realize their Buddha-nature. Hindus want to experience oneness with their understanding of what we would refer to with the word “God.” Sufis want the ecstasy of union with Divine Love. Being Christian is living in a way that identifies with what the Christian mystics refer to as the “Christ-Spirit.” Paul referred to it as “putting on the mind of Christ.”

Though these religious/spiritual paths are different, what they have in common is that they are unitive rather than divisive, they are non-dualistic rather than rationally dualistic, they are mystical in that the practitioner experiences her or his identity is joined with that which is more than, and at the same time one with, our own identity.

Though I had grown up in a church setting, attending religious services regularly, and had heard or read Jesus having said, “I and the Father are one,” I had either not been taught or had not heard, for whatever reason, Jesus to say “and so are you.” Mystical Christianity knows this truth experientially. Or, seeks to know it.

I was certainly in the second half of my life before I got it that the Kingdom of God Jesus talked about was not a place to get to. Rather, it was a place to come from. The goal the Christian path was not to have faith in Jesus but to have the faith of Jesus. Faith in Jesus usually becomes competitive and sectarian.

I believe that when we seek what is truest in the Christian tradition, we will encounter what is truest in all traditions, that which goes beyond. The specific sets of rituals and beliefs is what makes each religion unique. Being very clear about Jesus and what he taught runs us directly into the truth he said would set us free to encounter any and all just as he did. Would that not be not only freeing but also good for the world?

The problem is that many people who call themselves Christian are not at all clear about who Jesus was, is or what he said and wants to say. We have to allow Jesus to be much more than he is usually allowed to be. Jesus is likely thought of, because of the various ways people learn of him, as a kindly, miracle-working teacher who taught the Golden Rule and who came down from heaven to die for the sins of the world.

There is probably no greater distortion to or about the Jesus story than the misinformation that comes pouring out at this time of year and which culminates at Christmas.

So, I want to take today and next week to talk some about the Christmas stories that every one of us has been exposed to in one way or another and see what are some of the abiding spiritual truths hidden like precious gems in these stories.

That introduction enough?

Before we get to the Christmas stories, let's start with religion in general.

People in this country get their knowledge about the Christian religion from three broad sources.

The first source is what I call cultural osmosis.

There are enough things said in the public arena, especially by politicians and popular preachers, that most people have heard smatterings of the biblical story. Most people have heard of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Jim Gaffigan in his book, "Dad is Fat" has an hilarious bit about circumcision. According to Gaffigan's version, God would make a special nation out of Abraham's offspring. Abraham's part would be to circumcise himself. Which Gaffigan said he simply could not identify with. The comic pictures Abraham stepping out of the shower the next morning after having done this and his wife, Sarah, saying to him, "Abe, what in the world have you done to yourself?"

Abraham says, "God told me to do it."

"Sure. And what if God told you to sacrifice your first born."

Abraham replies, "Yeah, there's something I've got to talk to you about."

Cultural osmosis is not a good source of reliable religious information.

Religious literacy in this country is abysmal. In one quiz, people thought Peter and Paul were twins and the epistles were wives of the apostles. Some people think the phrase, "The Lord helps those who help themselves" appears in the Bible - perhaps is even something Jesus said.

Though the line is often attributed to Benjamin Franklin is is much older than that and, besides, is just the opposite of Biblical teachings. God helps the helpless and seeks to enlist us in that endeavor.

A second source of biblical and religious knowledge for many people has been their exposure to various teachings from the religious organizations of their youth. You may or may not have gone to church as a child.

This experience seems to cut in a variety of directions. I grew up in a family where we were expected to be in church three times a week - sometimes more. Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday nights were the norm.

This burns some people out completely.

Others get presented with damaging teachings that make them feel guilty and bad about themselves.

Much of what people hear in these religious settings is intellectually incredible and getting no exposure or training in how to hear the mythic or poetic, they simply toss such teachings out and leave the church behind.

It is somewhat like the Santa myth. Parents tell the story, because it is such a fun one, but winking all the time knowing the time will come when, inevitably, their children no longer believe in Santa.

I have heard many people tell me over the years, in one way or another, that they had to leave church in order to grow spiritually.

Others buy so completely into what they hear that they never leave what we know as pre-critical levels of thinking in dealing with the religious teachings they receive. They may go on to get advanced degrees in other areas but they remain at a third-grade level of understanding religious and spiritual truths. Things like belief in a literal virgin birth would be an example of this. We'll get to this a bit later.

I personally am so grateful for the church-going background I had. I was wrapped up in a culture of good and loving people who, just like us, given the light and awareness they had, did their best they could to embody the highest values their consciousness could grasp.

Some of the religious teachings I got enabled me to be critical, in a positive way, of other religious teachings I got. I learned to see some of it as tribalistic, narrow and judgmental. But, a seed was planted that there was more.

A third source of religious knowledge and biblical information comes to people from movies, television and novels.

One of my university professors was not only one of the translators who worked on the Revised Standard Version of the Bible but was also a consultant to Cecil B. DeMille on the movie, "The Ten Commandments." I stood in line to buy tickets to that movie when it first came out in 1956. It now frequently appears on TV around Easter time and it makes me shudder to see how absolutely god-awful it is.

This kind of movie, and there have been plenty of them, contributes to what I call "bathrobe theology." Such movies are full of gladiators, full-breasted women and they usually further a literal understanding of the Bible. Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ," falls into this category. It tried to make very literal the accounts we have of the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus. Almost no biblical scholar sees that story as being literally true. But, that is another matter for another time.

My hunch is that more people are more familiar with "It's a Charlie Brown Christmas," than with the story that is behind the two very different nativity stories that are told in Christian Scriptures.

By the way, I am in no way wanting to or am being a "Bible basher." Quite the contrary. If we don't get past the surface level or what we have been taught, we won't enter that space of transformation I spoke of earlier. I am

quite convinced that a religion the mind rejects does not offer a God we can give our hearts to.

There are only two accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures. What people know, or think they know, are contained only in these two accounts - Matthew and Luke. Usually the story that is told every Christmas is a meshing of these two accounts with some extra stuff thrown in because tradition has put these elements there. This is amazing because the two versions are so dramatically different that it is impossible logically to put them together. They not only tell entirely different stories but neither one of them passes the litmus test of historical accuracy.

Let me give you a synopsis of each version.

In Matthew's version Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married when Mary is found to be pregnant. Joseph, suspecting the worst, plans to divorce her, but is told in a dream not to do so because this is God's doing. (Do you know of another Joseph whose life, and that of his nation, was determined by dreams that he had?) So Joseph and Mary get married.

Wise men come from the east, following a star that has led them to Jerusalem. They ask where the King of the Jews is to be born. King Herod checks with Jewish scholars and finds out that this predicted king is to come from Bethlehem. He tells the wise men this and they follow a star to Bethlehem. The star stops over a house where the family of Jesus lives, not over a stable, and they offer the child gifts. Then, warned in a dream not to go back by the way they had come, which is what Herod had requested, they go home.

Herod, since he is the king, fears a rival so he sends his troops to slaughter every male child two years and younger in and around Bethlehem. But Joseph, has another dream where he is warned of danger, so he takes Mary and Jesus and goes to Egypt. Do you know of any other time in Jewish history when first-born males were slaughtered? Or, a time when time spent in exile in Egypt was part of Jewish history?



After a while Joseph learns that Herod has died. He plans to return to his home but since Herod's son is now the ruler they decide to go to Nazareth where Jesus is raised.

By the way, there is no record from any other history of the time of such a slaughter taking place.

Luke's version is much longer and so different that one might wonder if Matthew and Luke are talking about the same person.

Luke's version begins with an angel making an announcement to Elizabeth, a barren woman, that she will give birth to John the Baptist. Later an angel appears to Mary and tells her that she is to give birth to the Son of God.

The Roman emperor Augustus makes a decree that everyone in the empire needs to register for a census. This is where the Charlie Brown Christmas story begins. "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed." We are told that this is the first census, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone is to return to his ancestral home. Which means that Joseph, since he was a descendent from David, had to leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem. While they were there Mary gives birth to Jesus in a stable and lays him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

By the way, just to put this in context, there is no record anywhere of any authority ordering people to return to their ancestral home for such a census or taxation. This assumes a level of governmental efficiency that did not and does not exist anywhere in the world. It would have been unimaginable in that world, that did not issue birth certificates, marriage licenses or death certificates.

Besides, in Luke's genealogy of Jesus, there are forty-one generations between David and Joseph. The number of direct heirs produced in forty-one generations would be approaching a number in the millions. David had multiple wives - his son Solomon had a thousand. Within a few generations almost everyone could claim that they were a direct heir of David. No

wonder there was no room at the inn! There would have been no city in the world, then or now, that could have held such a number.

Besides, what husband in his right mind would have taken his eight-month pregnant wife on a journey of almost a hundred miles, the distance between Nazareth to Bethlehem? Why would he even take her? Women were not enrolled in the decision-making process of society.

Shepherds in the fields are informed of the birth and they go worship the child in Bethlehem. Eight days later Jesus is circumcised. Then, many days later, Jesus is presented in the temple by his parents to offer the sacrifice prescribed for this occasion. When Mary and Joseph have finished all of this, they return to Nazareth where Jesus is raised. They do not spend several years in Egypt.

Notice that in neither story are there camels.

Nor, Santa.

The birth stories of Jesus were not a part of the early Christian movement. Paul, the church's first theologian, in the sense that his writings were written chronologically before anything else we have in the Christian collection, never mentions it. Nor do Mark or John. These stories were only important to whoever wrote Luke and Matthew.

The questions we have to deal with are why were these stories important to them? What kind of stories are they?

A lot of people think that the only choices in dealing with these stories are: are they factually true? Or, are they fables?

Either of these options misses how edgy these stories are, how politically subversive they are.

There was a time when people heard these stories and never questioned whether they were true or not. Factual truth was not a consideration. What mattered to them was what the stories meant.

Around the middle of the 18th century, and as this movement developed, it was referred variously to as “the age of reason,” “the enlightenment” or “modernity,” a shift in thinking occurred.

Whatever it is called and whenever it is dated, what happened was a shift in human thinking where there was a critical questioning of traditional institutions, customs and morals. A strong belief in rationality and science began to rule the day and there was a shift in the way that people began to think.

The advantages of this are, obviously, enormous. All the technological advances we enjoy today find their birth in this movement. Philosophers and scientists alike began to wonder: “How do we know what we know?” And, “What is true?”

The harvest we have reaped from these questions being raised has been so bountiful as to boggle the mind. Even those who started this movement could not possibly imagine the benefits we reap now.

For example, Google fields a million requests every ten seconds. When you put a query into Google, it has to travel an average of 1,500 miles to a data center. A single query uses 1,000 computers in .2 seconds to retrieve an answer.

This “age of reason” thing has also cost us. It has led many people to think that truth and factuality are the same. This has led many people to think that truth is that which can be verified and if something can’t be verified, it must not be the truth. If something isn’t factual, it must not be true. This is called “fact fundamentalism.”

Though all religions have been affected by this, it is especially apparent in the mono-theistic religions. You can clearly see it dividing Christianity.

On one side of the divide are those who hold it that if the stories of the Bible aren't factually true, then they aren't true and, if they aren't true, then the collection we call "the Bible," isn't true.

Or, because it is the Bible and the Bible is held by many to be "the Word of God," then not only is it true but it is literally true.

Let me say it again: if we don't recover the mystical dimension of faith, if we don't embrace and inhabit the power of myths, if we don't embrace and live into the reality of cosmic evolution, not only does our religion not have much of a future but we cannot experience transformation or contribute to the transformation of the world.

I know this scares the bejabbers out of some people - especially the notion of cosmic evolution.

As I understand it, there are the same number of atoms in the cosmos as there were when everything started at the big bang over 13.8 billion years ago. Both the evolutionary biologists, physicists and theologians are now all saying the same thing. Not only are we part of a constantly changing energy field but one that is also evolving and the human species is creation becoming aware of itself, creation becoming conscious. This is such an exciting truth. It is so arrogant for humans to think, and so narcissistic, that God waited until there were Baptists in Tennessee to say how things in churches ought to be organized. There is such an infinitely bigger view than this.

Every year around Christmas week there are numerous television programs on or about the birth stories of Jesus. There are religious services broadcast from the Vatican, the Church of the Nativity, Washington Cathedral and so forth. Also, there will circulate on the internet something that seeks to document how the planets could line up in such a way as to provide a star for the wise men to follow. This is how fact fundamentalism makes some people twist their minds and souls into pretzels in order not to give up a factual belief. Our world view knows that it is ridiculous to think that a

single star in the heaven could guide wise men from afar to a stable in some town. Go out tonight and look up into the sky and see if you can find a star shining down on someone's home. If you do, you have a major find on your hands.

In the world in which these stories were first told, their factuality was not an issue. What mattered was, "What does the story mean?"

By the way, and this is very disturbing to many people who hold it that these stories are factually true and happened just the way they are recorded in Christian scriptures, miraculous birth stories are a dime a dozen from that period of time. Are they all literally true? Or, just the one about Jesus?

We are going to return to this next week. Let me give a bit of a summary and preview of where we are and are going.

The birth stories, as well as the other miracle stories that grew up around Jesus, are late developments in the story. They sought, and seek, to answer questions like: Who is really king of the Jews, and to whom we could give our loyalty? What really is the path to peace on earth? Political and military might? Or, possibly, love? What is the light of the world? Or, could be? Where is wisdom to be found? Where do we find fulfillment of God's dream for humanity?

We will not find answers for these questions if we do not move past fact fundamentalism.

Clearly I think it is important for us to be as knowledgeable as possible about what the Christian scriptures really say and intend to teach. But there is more to it than that. These stories stand the same chance as the parables Jesus first told. That is, they raise the question of who really runs and rules our lives and about what is of utmost importance.

These stories, in brief, are about the inadequacy of human language to be a vehicle for making rational sense out of an encounter with Sacred Mystery.

Only a God language could be used to talk meaningfully about God and we do not have a God language.

Without a God language, human beings can talk about the Sacred only by heightening human events until they become supernatural reality similar to what those people who created these stories expected God and God's actions to be. That was clearly the case when the first followers of Jesus, those who took their cue from him and told parables about him, sought words and stories big enough to describe the life they had found in their encounter with Jesus. It was such a profound experience for them that they said that in him they had seen God. And if you go back and read just these stories, the word that occurs over and over and over again is "joy."

The angels in the Luke story sang, "Joy to the world!" That joy found life and expression in those first followers, a joy that transformed them and which, through them, attracted and transformed others.

The message of the incarnation is that matter matters to God. Which means that you matter and I matter and all others matter and all the earth and everything about it matters. When we live that, we move toward transformation.

So to you I say, I would sing it but I love you too much to do that, "Tidings of comfort and joy."

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: You carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.