

# Deborah Sokolove: Christmas Comfort

A Sermon for Seekers Church

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by Deborah Sokolove

## Christmas Comfort

Our worship life here at Seekers has been very full and rich lately, and it seems like today is an opportunity to take a good, deep breath, and simply be here, comfortably and quietly, together in God's presence. This last week in the year, after Christmas and before the first day of the New Year, is a time to catch up, to catch our breath, to fill in the birthday and anniversary dates on the new calendar, to think about the year that has been, and to think of the year that is just about to begin. It is the season of good intentions, of resolution making, of remembering and of dreaming. And it is also the season of Christmas, which did not end on December 25, but continues now until Epiphany, next week.

The Hebrew Scripture and Gospel readings for today are what are known as "infancy stories", stories about the childhood of important figures in the biblical record. First, we read of Samuel's boyhood in the Temple, and his mother's continuing love and care for him although she only saw him once a year. We are not told what he felt for her, whether he returned her love or found her recurrent presence (and presents) intrusive as he lived a life set apart by the ritual rhythms of the sacred year. Perhaps he felt abandoned when she left him there at the age of three or four; perhaps he was angry or resentful that he did not have an ordinary childhood, but was from an early age a servant of God and of the priests of God. Or,

perhaps his duties in the Temple were light compared to those of a relatively poor farm boy, who kept his family's herds and worked the fields and orchards. Childhood in those days was not a time of school and play, but a time of full participation in the bare subsistence life of a still partly nomadic people in a marginally hospitable land. The Bible doesn't tell us how Samuel felt about the life that was chosen for him before he was old enough to object, but rather of a mother's care, a priest's blessing, and that the boy Samuel grew up blessed by God and loved by those who knew him.

The Gospel lesson gives a contrasting picture of Jesus' childhood. Although we are told that Jesus' birth was surrounded by mysterious circumstances, by the time of this story he has apparently been living the normal life of a village boy, the son of a carpenter who is sufficiently devout to make an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the time of the spring festival. It seems that a large group of relatives and neighbors traveled together, with the children moving freely around and among them. I imagine it was a little like a Seekers overnight, where no parent worries too much if one of the twelve-year-olds is out of sight for a few hours. Twelve-year-olds then, and now, can be pretty responsible and resourceful, and aren't too likely to get lost in a situation that they have been in since before they could remember. So, it isn't surprising that Mary and Joseph didn't start worrying until it was time to make camp for the night, and Jesus was after all not hanging out with his cousins and friends. But boys that age do get hungry, and they usually do turn up for meals.

So Joseph and Mary turned back towards Jerusalem, and by the time they found him three days later, they were probably frantic. Unlike Hannah, who had intentionally left her son Samuel in the care of the priests at the Temple, Mary and Joseph expected Jesus to stay with them, at least until he was grown up. Jesus was not left by his parents, but rather chose

to stay and learn from the teachers what he could not learn at home. Like any adolescent, he was intent on his own agenda, and didn't much think about how his parents might feel. He knew that his life is somehow special, and seemed surprised by his parents' concern. But Mary, like Hannah, continued to keep him close in her heart, if sometimes distant in physical and emotional reality; and like Samuel before him, Jesus grew up blessed by God and loved by those who knew him.

According to one way of looking at the Bible, the story of Samuel is a kind of "type", or foreshadowing, of the story of Jesus, and that is probably why they are juxtaposed in the lectionary for this week. The last sentence of each tale ends similarly, like a formula that ties them together in the story-telling tradition that was the source of both. Many scholars today question whether either story is true, whether they actually happened in exactly the way they are written. They argue that such infancy stories are typical of a certain kind of myth, the one known as the "the hero's journey." Legends like these, they say, grew up later, after the person in question had already become known as a leader or holy man, as if to say "see, he was already special even as a child."

But it is too easy to get caught up in questioning whether or not the stories are exactly true in that historical sense, and miss the point entirely. For those of you who were not at the last sing-along, I would like to share a new version of a familiar Christmas carol. It is sung to the tune of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," and was written with Unitarians in mind, but I think it is applicable to many of us here at Seekers, so I've changed the first line. The words go like this:

*God rest ye, merry Seekers all, let nothing you dismay;  
Remember there's no evidence there was a Christmas Day;  
When Christ was born is just not known, no matter what they  
say,  
O tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,  
Glad tidings of reason and fact.*

*Our current Christmas customs came from Persia and from  
Greece,  
From solstice celebrations of the ancient Middle East.  
This whole darn Christmas spiel is just another pagan feast,  
O tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,  
Glad tidings of reason and fact.  
There was no star of Bethlehem, there was no angels' song;  
There could not have been wise men for the trip would take  
too long.  
The stories in the Bible are historically wrong,  
O tidings of reason and fact, reason and fact,  
Glad tidings of reason and fact!*

But reason and fact are not often very comforting, and a too-careful analysis of historical data can suck the joy right out of the season. Despite the warnings of those who assert we must believe every thing in the Bible as literal fact or the whole edifice of faith will fall, Christmas is not really about the verifiable facts surrounding the birth of Jesus on December 25, or on any other specific day, but about the joyful celebration that God became flesh and dwelt among us.

Christmas is about the birth of the holy child, about eternal hope and newness and innocence. Like the hero's journey, the birth of the holy child is a story found in every culture. It is an archetype, true not because it "really happened" exactly as the tale is told, but true because every family with a new baby is the Holy Family. New mothers and fathers everywhere look at their children with the same adoration that is seen on Mary's face in so many Renaissance paintings titled "Adoration of the Virgin." I remember feeling, as I looked at each of my own infant children, that my heart would break at the wonder and love and joy that I felt. The Christmas story is all of that, and it is more: it is the assertion of the Incarnation that God loves us and is with us in all of our joys and all of our sorrows.

For nearly two thousand years, Christians have been tinkering with how best to make the Incarnation a present reality throughout the year. Easter and Pentecost grew out of their historical connections with the Jewish feasts of Pesach and Shavuot, and Sunday gatherings for communal worship was a natural outgrowth of weekly Sabbath observances, transposed to the "eighth day", the Lord's day, the first day of the New Creation. The dates and times of other celebrations, however, were established for other reasons. For instance, there is historical evidence that the date of Christmas was consciously established to coincide with, and supersede, the Roman Saturnalia and other solstice festivals. Then, having decided to celebrate Christmas on December 25, the date of the Annunciation had to be exactly nine months earlier, on March 25. Likewise, the celebration of the birth of John the Baptist had to be six months earlier, on June 25, both because of the biblical testimony that Elizabeth was six months pregnant when the angel came to Mary, and as a kind of reference to the length of daylight and to his saying that "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30) Again, the celebration of Saint Stephen's day has nothing to do with his actual date of birth or death, but is the first day after Christmas, because Stephen is remembered as the first Christian martyr. And so on.

It is easy to make fun of this kind of reasoning, but that allows us to keep ourselves from some of the richness of Christian life. One of the riches that I have been discovering lately is the beauty of the liturgical year. Some years ago, when the theme for Lent was particularly dark, Brenda objected; saying that we know that Christ is always risen. Of course, she was right, but there was also rightness in the choice to move into what an anonymous writer of the 14th century called "The Cloud of Unknowing." What living into the liturgical year can do is to allow us to concentrate more particularly, and over an extended period of time, on one particular aspect of God's life with us.

On your bulletin cover, there is a schematic diagram of the Christian year, as it fits with the months of the regular calendar. The two main celebrations, of course, are Christmas and Easter, but neither of these are really just single days. Rather, each is the high point of a festal cycle that begins with preparation and self-examination, and ends with going out to do God's work in the world. We at Seekers have become fairly familiar with the inward-looking that is characteristic of Lent, but it is harder to maintain such a preparatory attitude during Advent, when everyone else, it seems, is exhorting us to shop and go to parties and sing Christmas carols. But like Lent, Advent is a season of the not-yet. Of course, we know that Christ lived and died and rose again almost two thousand years ago, but in Advent we concentrate on the time before, on waiting, on expectation not only of Jesus' birth in a stable, but of the coming reign of God. In many churches, not only do they not sing Christmas carols during Advent, but – as in Lent – they do not sing or say "Hallelujah", as a kind of "fast for the ears."

Then, when the moment comes at last, whether birth or resurrection, it is a real celebration that cannot be contained in a single day, but must be savored and assimilated for a time after the great moment of jubilation. So, Easter is a season that last seven weeks, until the coming of the Holy Spirit to us, the gathered believers at Pentecost. Likewise, Christmas is a season lasting twelve days, until Epiphany. That is why we sing Christmas carols today, even though outside the church Christmas is yesterday's newspaper – for us, here today, it is still Christmas. It takes time to assimilate something as incredibly wonderful as God becoming human!

In earlier versions of the calendar, Epiphany, or the Manifestation of God, celebrated the baptism of Jesus and Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana as well as the coming of the Magi. While these moments

are remembered on separate Sundays, the sequence still makes sense. At first, the angel came privately to Mary, to Joseph, to Elizabeth and to Zachariah. Then, the neighbors – the shepherds nearby – heard the good news. At last, strangers from a distant land arrived, and then returned to their homes, spreading the good news to the entire world. Epiphany is the end of the Christmas celebration, and at the same time the beginning of Christ's – and our – work in the world

So the "not-yet" of waiting turns for a time into the "already" of the heavenly feast. We are filled with love and peace and the Holy Spirit. Time becomes the eternal "now", as we know ourselves in the presence of God and of each other. But we are still human, still subject to the demands of earthly existence, and the ecstatic eternity begins to fade as we return to our ordinary life. In many churches, the weeks after Epiphany and after Pentecost are called just that: ordinary time. "Ordinary" originally meant "counting", like ordinal numbers, but mostly we use it to mean something that is just plain, nothing special, the same old thing. But Ordinary Time is not just the same old thing, because if we have lived into the realities of preparation and celebration, we have been transformed by the experience. We are renewed by that fleeting moment in the presence of God, by our awareness that God's truth is not always the same thing as verifiable, historical facts. In the weeks after Epiphany and after Pentecost, we bring the Word that we have received to a broken, needy world. Having heard and lived the story again ourselves, we are ready to spread the Good News of peace on earth, good will to all.

As we were going home on Christmas Eve, Glen said something to me about not having been able to see and hear and remember everything that happened in the service that night and on the Sunday before. I, too, felt a kind of loss, because I was too tired and too concerned about details to fully live into every moment. And yet, I was comforted, because I knew that even

though not everything had been recorded on videotape, and that no one person could remember everything exactly as it had happened; the experience of this Christmas will live in the collective memory of those who were there, as we tell the story to one another, each time a little differently, but always full of the tearful joy of our common celebration. The glad tidings are not those of reason and fact, but of comfort and of joy, as we live together in this expression of the ever-newborn, ever-dying, ever-resurrected Body of Christ. Hallelujah!