

## CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY

By Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
December 24, 2011

I do love Christmas. I love the sparkling lights and the soaring music, the vigorous flurry of gift buying and the sumptuous aromas of feast cooking. I love being at All Souls with you on Christmas Eve. Oh my, you do look marvelous! Congratulations, you've made it to Christmas.

I feel at home in this magnificent sanctuary tonight, and comfortable, and safe. I hope you feel the same. Truth be told, however, Christmas isn't about celebrating when times are good. It's about being saved when times are bad. The Christmas story tells of a savior coming to desperate people badly in need of one. The story has endured, and so has the need for a savior. Especially this year, I've been impressed by how commonplace the work of a savior can be.

It was an unremarkable Thursday evening last December when 26-year-old Mohammed Bouazzi pushed his hand cart to the wholesale market to buy fruit to sell the next day. He loaded two crates of pears, one crate of bananas, three crates of apples, as well as a day's supply of oranges and dates. They were the best he had ever seen. "With this fruit," he later told his mother, "I can buy some gifts for you. Tomorrow will be a good day."

Bouazzi's father had died when Bouazzi was three. Since age 12, he had been the sole breadwinner for his mother and five siblings, along with his disabled stepfather and uncle. They lived together in a four-room house in a scruffy and notoriously corrupt little town about 175 miles south of Tunis, the capital of Tunisia. Think Troy, New York—without the charm, and in the desert.

Hard-working and entrepreneurial, Bouazzi longed to buy a pickup, so he could purchase fruit directly from farmers, increasing his profit. With nine mouths to feed, his take-home pay of \$70 a month often fell short. He also wanted a permanent fruit stand, so he would be less susceptible to the corrupt police, who brashly stole bags of fruit and capriciously levied fines.

The following morning before dawn, as Bouazzi taking his fruit to the market, two officers stopped him and demanded his fruit. His uncle persuaded the officers to let him proceed, and then went to the chief of police to lodge a complaint. The chief called in the officers and berated them. Enraged, the officers found Bouazzi again, seized all his fruit and his scale—his entire business—and then beat him with a baton. One hour later, Bouazzi sat down in the market square before the police station, doused himself with paint thinner, and set himself on fire to protest this corrosive injustice.

What's most remarkable about Bouazzi's story is how unremarkable his life was—except for his final act. Bouazzi's protest changed our world profoundly. Dictators have

been ousted in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, and they're under heavy siege in Yemen and Syria. Something has changed in the Arab world.

To be sure, not everything has changed. My own guess is that some Muslim-majority nations will need to endure a period of Islamist rule until they discover that fealty to Allah alone won't produce food or jobs. But as the women's protest in Egypt last Tuesday demonstrates, Egyptian soldiers can no longer strip women with impunity. Even the Salafists—the Islamist group to the right of the Muslim Brotherhood who garnered 25% of the recent vote in Egypt—have been forced to couch their proposals in quasi-democratic terms. Mohammed Bouazzi may not have bought a gift for his mother on that Friday, but his gift to the rest of humanity will always endure.

On Christmas Eve, we gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, who hailed from a scruffy part of Galilee. Based on what we know of his actual life, it was equally unremarkable. The son of a carpenter, Jesus grew up under the Roman occupation and became increasingly incensed at how collusion with the Romans had corrupted the Jewish leaders. Jesus spent time in the temple and learned the teachings of the Hebrew prophets. He began preaching about how people should live in order to be good Jews: love God, love your neighbor, care for the sick, comfort the broken-hearted. He attracted a band of followers and a throng of listeners. Eventually he became a political liability to the Roman overlords and a religious embarrassment to the Jewish leader; and he was done away with. End of story.

Except not. Two thousand years later, this is what the celebration of his birth looks like: an elaborately choreographed festival of stories and songs, of guiding stars and angel choirs—not to mention that this holiday anchors the retail calendar. It's hard to overstate the impact of Jesus upon the course of human history over the past two thousand years.

Of course, many people believe his impact endures because he was the son of God—born of a virgin and the Holy Spirit—who grew up to live a perfect life and die a blameless death in order to save humanity from its innate sinfulness. You may find this version of the Jesus story hard to believe, as I do. But then our task is even more daunting: we must account for his impact in strictly human terms. If he was God, he should have changed human history. But if he wasn't divine, then the scope of his legacy becomes truly astounding.

Here's the point: if Jesus of Nazareth and Mohammed Bouazzi can change the world, anyone can. True, they both died in the end. But it's not clear that either intended to die—especially Bouazzi, who lived for several weeks after his act of protest. Being a savior isn't something you have to give up your life for; rather, it's something you need to give your life to. One person can change the world. Leymah Gbowee helps bring peace to Liberia. Paul Farmer helps bring healing to Haiti. Rachel Lloyd helps bring safety to trafficked women and girls in New York City. You can change the world. I can change the world.

Christmas isn't about celebrating when times are good. It's about being saved when times are bad. If you are in need tonight, you've come to the right place. Reach out for help; there are saviors among us. Christmas issues a casting call for modern-day saviors. Pay attention to the people around you. Listen to their longings. Respond to their cries for help. Keep them safe. Be a savior. It's the one gift that will endure always.