

SIMPLE SOLUTION

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Since the very first Christmas, stars have been one of the signs of the season. Whether sparkling atop a decorated tree, or glittering in a store window, or twinkling in the night sky, few images signify Christmas like a star. According to the story in the Christian New Testament, it was an angel—not a star—that enchanted and terrified the shepherds as they watched over their flocks by night. But the three wise men saw the star and knew what it meant: a long-awaited event had finally happened. The event had nothing to do with colorfully trimmed trees or brightly wrapped presents or lovingly prepared feasts. Nor did it have anything to do with the birth of a child in the usual sense.

The angel declared to the shepherds, “I bring you good news of a great joy for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David...” What? A baby? No, babies are born every night of every year. Every child is special, of course, but we do not celebrate Christmas every time a child is born. A prophet? No, prophets were also plentiful in those days. A king? No, although people hoped Jesus would grow up to lead the Jews to oust their Roman overlords. “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior.” The reason for the star, according to the angel, was the birth of a savior.

To be sure, the coming of a savior is important only if a savior is what you need. And it is especially important only if you need a savior badly. The Christian tradition is based on the belief that Adam and Eve—the first human beings—were created without sin in God’s perfect image, but fell from God’s favor when they sinned in the Garden of Eden. Since that moment, the story goes, God has searched for a way to enable men and women to redeem themselves and reclaim their original perfection. At various points in human history, God sent commandments to guide the people, prophets to warn them, plagues to punish them, even oppressors to haul them off into captivity; but nothing seemed to work, at least not completely and not for long.

Finally, God made one last-ditch effort to save the human race by coming to earth and taking on a human body. The goal of the incarnation, as Christians call it, was for this demi-god to live a perfect life and die a perfect death, thereby atoning for all human sin. The star of Bethlehem signaled that this savior, the one who would redeem humanity, had been born.

For Christians, everything hangs on the event signaled by the star of Bethlehem. But what about those of us who do not believe in original sin and eternal damnation? We need a savior too, sometimes—not to save our souls for eternity, but to redeem our lives here and now. We need salvation from despair, or failure, or greed, or anger, or loneliness, or grief, or selfishness. Where do we look for a savior?

The most intriguing aspect of the Christmas story to me isn’t the magic show: God becomes human, virgin gives birth to child, and so on. Stories like that were a dime a dozen in the ancient world. Rather, I’m fascinated by the counter-intuitive quality of the story. When the chips are down and the fate of humanity hangs in the balance, the

answer is to send a baby to save the day. Go figure—a baby. Maybe the point of the story is that salvation, in the end, is a rather simple matter.

Some years ago, during a grueling year of medical internship, my wife Holly had a three-week vacation. Most of her fellow interns went to Club Med to blow off steam. Holly went to Indonesia to work with Dr. Jon Rohde, a Harvard physician who developed a Rockefeller-funded program to address the alarming mortality rate among cholera victims. Before Dr. Rohde developed his breakthrough approach to treatment, a third of cholera victims died from massive loss of fluids. With his treatment, the mortality rate fell to fewer than three percent. The British medical journal *Lancet* described his approach as “potentially the most important medical advance of the 20th century.”

His challenge was to replace up to thirty liters of body fluids per day in patients who did not have access to hospitals and intravenous hydration. The answer? Oral rehydration therapy, or ORT: foil packets containing several salts and glucose, which could be mixed with a liter of water. Where no ORT packets were available, a mixture of water, sugar, and salt would suffice. It was, in Dr. Rohde’s words, a simple solution to one of the most pressing problems faced by people in poor countries.

During Holly’s time in Indonesia, she helped with a program to teach women to make the simple solution for their babies suffering from diarrhea, the main cause of infant mortality. The program continues today. In fact, Secretary Clinton saw the program still in action 30 years later on her trip to Indonesia last spring.

Christmas is about a simple solution that has an immense impact. It’s about the birth of a baby, the song of an angel choir, and the twinkle of a star. Properly read, the story illustrates the power of simple solutions to meet our deepest needs—our need for love, for comfort, and for wonder.

What’s a simple solution to our need for love? If you need to be saved from feeling lost or lonely, take a cue from the Christmas story and remember that salvation comes in human form. Reach out to the people around you. In the hour of need, we put our faith in what the poet William Blake calls the human form of love divine. Blake writes:

For Mercy has a human heart, and Pity a human face;
And Love, the human form divine, and Peace, the human dress.
Then everyone, of every clime, that prays in deep distress,
Prays to the human form divine—Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

For his part, Blake thought the human form divine described only Jesus. My view is that you and I are also human forms of the divine. To say that we are the presence of God in this world is not a metaphor. We are the face of God in this world, and God’s voice and hands. God changes outcomes in this world only as we change them. God is not an independent agent, in other words. The active agency of the divine life emerges through our choices and actions.

Especially during this holiday season, reach out to others who need your help. Volunteer at Monday Night Hospitality or the Friday Lunch program. Offer to run errands or buy groceries for a homebound neighbor or friend. If someone looks distressed, ask what’s wrong and listen attentively to their answer. We are the human form of love divine—a simple solution to the problem of feeling lost and lonely. If you see someone who needs to be saved, or if you yourself need saving, reach out. It’s that simple.

What's a simple solution to our need for comfort? If you need to be saved from heartache or gloom, I suggest that you take a cue from the angel choir and find a source of comforting music. This is a good season for music, whether it's listening to "The Diary of Alicia Keys" or Handel's seasonal favorite *Messiah*, which appropriately begins with the word "comfort." Music can be a simple solution to feeling blue.

In a speech made several years ago at The Boston Conservatory, Karl Paulnack, Director of the Music Division, describes why music has this effect. The ancient Greeks, he says, understood music and astronomy as two sides of the same coin. Astronomy, in their view, studied relationships between observable external objects, and music studied relationships between invisible internal objects. "Music has a way of finding the big, invisible moving pieces inside our hearts and souls, and helping us figure out the position of things inside us."

For this reason, Paulnack insists, music is "not a luxury, a lavish thing that we fund from leftovers of our budgets, not a plaything or an amusement or a pass time. Music is a basic need of human survival. Music is one of the ways we make sense of our lives, one of the ways in which we express feelings when we have no words, a way for us to understand things with our hearts when we can't with our minds."

If you find your spirits lagging during the holiday, head for a jazz club or a concert hall—or even a house of worship. Live music almost always yields a better experience than digitized music, in part because you share the experience with other people. You'll find comfort both in the companionship and in the music. It's that simple.

Finally, what's a simple solution to our need for awe and wonder? If you find yourself becoming jaded or cynical at the commercialism of the holidays, take a page from the wise men and the Greeks: look up at the night sky. Some astronomers believe the star of Bethlehem was an especially bright conjunction of Venus and Jupiter. If so, it must have been quite a sight. The brilliant Venus is the planet closest to Earth; its brightness in the sky is second only to that of the Moon. This time of year, Venus appears just before dawn in the east, where Jupiter rises just after sunset.

Named for the king of the gods, Jupiter is the largest of the planets: all of the Sun's other planets could fit inside it with room left over to rattle around. Through even a small telescope, you can see the shimmering brown bands of cloud that obscure its surface. You can also see, some fifty degrees higher in the eastern sky, what to my eye is the most magical of all celestial sights: the exquisite planet Saturn, with its incomparable rings.

On a clear night under a dark sky, you can also see the Andromeda Galaxy, appearing as a faint but unmistakable smudge of light. Made up of something like a trillion stars, the Andromeda Galaxy is the most distant object that can be seen with the unaided eye. The light now reaching earth from Andromeda began its light-speed journey toward us more than two million years ago. Beyond Andromeda lies everything else: more than 125 billion galaxies in the universe, all told.

As you peer into the night sky, ask yourself how and why. Ask yourself what happened in the beginning and what came before that. Our universe is unimaginably vast and wondrous. If you find yourself frustrated because the checkout line is too long at the toy store or the bakery has run out of your favorite pecan pie, pick up a pair of binoculars and a star chart, or a book by Timothy Ferris. You'll have a different perspective on calamities involving wrapping paper or plum pudding. You'll feel more at home in the universe and in your own life. It's that simple.

None of this is news, of course, but we tend to forget the simple solutions that can make the most difference in our lives and our world. That's why Christmas comes once a year: to remind us of what we should never forget. The story of the baby, the angels, and the star endures. It reminds us that our most essential needs—for love, for comfort, for wonder—can be satisfied almost anywhere. We just have to open our eyes and our ears and our hearts. It's that simple.

Amen. Happy Holidays. I love you. And may God bless us all.