

Stand There and Shine

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

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Reading **Look up. Look around.**

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I'd gotten in the habit of keeping my head down when running errands, stuck in my own dark cloud, closed off, and hardly noticing where I was or who was around me.

On this day, I decided to greet the world differently.

I stopped for gas and started filling up when I noticed a man several rows down. His car was old and packed with junk — so what? He had old work clothes on and looked to be in his 20s — again, so what? All I did was look at him. Although there were other people around, he came over to me, said hello, and tried to explain something to me in half-English, half-Spanish.

I finally understood that he had to get somewhere and needed directions. No problem — except I didn't speak Spanish.

He pulled out his cell phone, punched in a number, and handed me his phone.

"Hello?" I said.

The voice on the other end told me that her son had just driven straight through from another state, had only 45 minutes to get to a job in another town, and didn't know which direction to go. Did I have any kids?, she asked.

I have sons, too. Mom to mom, I explained to her where he should go, she looked it up on Google maps, and together we came up with the best plan to avoid rush-hour traffic and get him out to his job without a minute to spare.

I gave the phone back to the young man. His mother gave him directions in Spanish while I pointed in the right direction. Then he handed the phone back to me.

"What's your name?" his mother asked. She said she wanted to thank me by name for helping her son.

I'm sure the mother and son from Texas have forgotten about this day, long ago, but the named blessing I gratefully accepted that day has long stayed with me, a reminder of the simple act of looking up with an open heart.

SERMON

Stand There and Shine

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

I used a short writing from Sue Monk Kidd in the e-news to introduce the service today. (According to Constant Contact, 40% of you will have seen it!)

It began, "When my daughter was small she got the dubious part of the Bethlehem star in a Christmas play."

The thing is, it's June, so you may be wondering why I used this reference, because it means we have to think back a bit – or forward. But you're smart people. And I know you'll get the point once we get going.

I invite you to think back to the Christmas story a bit. We need to begin by remembering there are lots of important parts: Mary and Joseph, of course. The baby. The barn animals, and the wise-people ... and who knows how many other attendants or townsfolk. There are lots of important parts in lots of stories, definitional parts, game-changing parts ... so maybe that's why Ms. Kidd described her daughter's part as "dubious." Maybe she didn't think the star was very important.

She might want to rethink that.

Still, I have seen lots of Christmas pageants. I imagine many of you have, as well, if not right here at Theodore Parker Church, then elsewhere, and maybe you starred in some of them?! There are, as mentioned, always a whole cast of characters, and lots of costumes. Mary always has that lovely blanket draped over her head, and Joseph and the guys have headbands around their foreheads holding the square pieces of fabric in place so they look like Bedouins. One year we made sheep's ears with cotton balls on plastic headbands, and silver sparkling twisters are always good accents for the angels. But I'm not sure I have ever seen a pageant where the star was embodied, exactly. Maybe THAT'S why Ms. Kidd thought the part was "dubious." Mostly – and you may remember – the star is a cardboard thing with glitter from five years ago when it was first made, or ten years ago, and it has been sitting in the basement and resurrected – no pun intended – every year for the big pageant, and the points of the star are pretty much always curled in and the paint is worn and someone re-glues the glitter so that all over again the carpet is covered with tiny gold flecks that fall down like a short and very location-specific snowfall, only golden, not white.

But not this time. This time they left the cardboard in the basement. This time the Bethlehem star was embodied.

“After her first rehearsal she burst through the door with her costume, a five-pointed star lined in shiny gold tinsel designed to drape over her like a sandwich board.”

Can't you just see it? A five-pointed star with tinsel that drapes and sparkles and catches the lights as the child moves. And, seriously, who doesn't want a chance to be draped in gold?!

We can imagine the CHILD's enthusiasm, can't we? A good costume – or the right outfit, the perfect pair of shoes, the right tie – is really what it's all about sometimes! And she runs into the kitchen, all set to share her sparkling little self.

Sue Kidd continues: “ ‘What exactly will you be *doing* in the play?’ I asked her.”

And I thought, what is it with parents? Or any of us, really, who wonder things like that? “What exactly will you be doing in the play?” as if being all about the tinsel isn't a really big deal? Authority figures are always wondering, shouldn't we want to be the lead? Mary? Or Joseph, who made such a big decision to go ahead and marry Mary even though she was pregnant? Or even, I don't know, one of the angels or a sheep? We could work up a really good baaaaahhhh!

“ ‘What exactly will you be doing in the play,’ I asked her?”

What do you want to be when you grow up? How are you going to afford your life? What will you accomplish?

What exactly will you be doing in the play?

And – we imagine – in the most wonderful, look-up, look-around, open-hearted response, Mom-why-would-you-ask-a-question-with-such-an-obvious-answer, the child innocently replies,

"I just stand there and shine."

By God, or the spirit of life, or some curious twist of fate, I was given a beautiful bright life, I was made a star, so I will humbly and wholeheartedly embrace my five-pointed tinsel-ed life and shine.

She might as well have said, “Mom – sweet pea – when I stand up in front of the whole crowd in my beautiful glittering attire, I will be a blessing.”

In my shining moment, in my quiet presence, I will be a blessing.

She makes it sound so simple, doesn't she? And so, sort of, enviable? Everyone else in the play has to remember words and timing, and movements and when to pick up the baby and where do the wise

men stand anyway, and why is that little sheep still baaaahing, but no – she says – I just stand there and shine.

Come on now. She almost makes us covet that part! It doesn't even need to be Christmas for that miracle. Covered in tinsel, twinkling to beat the band, and with no apparent effort. Yes, she almost makes us covet that part.

ALMOST.

Because, let's be honest. We live in a pretty competitive society. When is the last time you simply wanted to be the one who is asked to just stand there with your tinsel on and be a blessing by virtue of your shine?

No speaking part. No grand gestures or words of wisdom. Not sure about the bonus. Pretty sure not many will even know it was you behind those glittering points. No accolades heaped on your brilliant performance ... just, you know, shine for all the world to see?

Oh, I will tell you, my friends, that the one who can pull that off? Who can genuinely BE in an inspired and sparkling simplicity? Now THAT is being a blessing. And some of you pull it off. I know you do.

Why is it so hard for the rest of us? Why is it so hard to think: By God, or the spirit of life, or some curious twist of fate, I was given a beautiful bright life, I was made a star, so I will humbly and wholeheartedly embrace my five-pointed tinsel-ed life and shine.

Clarke Wells gave us this amazing thought years ago: "It is not always the great evils that obstruct and waylay our joy," he said. "It is our unnecessary and undignified surrender to the petty enemies ...," by which he may have meant pride or self-importance, or aspiration to a particular kind of greatness that those around us might admire, measuring up to some standard of achievement imposed on us by the world at large.

"I suggest," Wells continues, "it is our duty to scheme against them and make them subservient to human decree – time and schedules, our irritabilities of the day. ... Matters more subtle and humane should command our lives."

Matters more subtle and humane like ... looking up and around, being present to each other, shining.

The dictionary says a blessing is "a thing conducive to happiness or welfare." I'm glad they said OR. It occurs to me that sometimes blessings are about being the happiness, and sometimes they are about needing it for our welfare, and on occasion those two things are not the same. Our tinsel fades a bit, at times. Our star tips turn in and we need the light of another source.

The poet John O'Donohue offers the poem, "Beannacht" ("Blessing"), for occasions like these.

On the day when
the weight deadens
on your shoulders
and you stumble,
may the clay dance
to balance you.

And when your eyes
freeze behind
the grey window
and the ghost of loss
gets into you,
may a flock of colours,
indigo, red, green,
and azure blue,
come to awaken in you
a meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays
in the currach of thought
and a stain of ocean
blackens beneath you,
may there come across the waters
a path of yellow moonlight
to bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,
may the clarity of light be yours,
may the fluency of the ocean be yours,
may the protection of the ancestors be yours.

And so may a slow
wind work these words
of love around you,
an invisible cloak
to mind your life.

I wonder if sometimes the cloak he writes of is golden, covered in tinsel and there but for our notice.

These are such complicated times. It feels that there are at hand what Wells called “great evils,” and there is much to do to turn the world in the direction of goodness and compassion. I suppose it is always so. But many of us feel so intensely the need to be doing, acting, changing. These times require it of us – attention, engagement; AND, we must bear witness to our simpler needs.

The world too little values the humble act of shining, or the daily gifts of the earth and her creatures, or the significance of noticing each other. But these are the blessings that refresh.

This tradition that we choose – that our new members have chosen today – assures us that the act of blessing, of being, of bestowing, is not reserved for clergy, nor for those somehow understood to have closer connections to the holy or divine. Ours is the prophet-hood of all believers, and each and every one of us, and each and every creature, has the capacity to be a blessing. We are all in the business of being blessings to this life when we choose to.

Sometimes it’s really important to just stand there and shine, to be content to reflect the light of life for others. And when our spirits are sufficiently filled, not FULL necessarily – is it ever so? – but sufficiently filled, then to look up and notice; to look around and engage; as our hearts will be open.

But first, just stand there and shine.

By God, or the spirit of life, or some curious twist of fate, you were given a beautiful bright life. You were made a star.

May you be blessed as you are a blessing.

Our closing hymns – yes! Begin with 350, which may be somewhat less familiar than hymn 118, which we will sing a capella – “This Little Light of Mine.”