

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2019

Census and Counting Miracles

Since childhood I have been taught of the Christmas miracle. I asked a lot about miracles and frankly ones about healing those who couldn't walk sounded legit. Maybe that loaves and fishes one but I also wanted a full account of modern-day miracles. They never gave me the list I requested.

In Sister Petronilla's second grade class, at St. Genevieve School, the term 'virgin birth' was something I had no concept for. Today if my son uses the word virgin, I give him a lecture on body autonomy and consent. Thus, understanding what was so miraculous about people having a baby who were not married, was confusing to my eight-year-old mind. I think I was far more focused on what would sleeping on straw be like. That sounded quite uncomfortable. What was it like living with the animals? I wanted to know if it smelled bad in the manger.

In fifth grade I was required by Sister Assumptia to memorize the readings from Luke Chapter 2 that we just heard. All I knew about a census was that it was a count, and everyone had to be counted. I didn't question it. I hadn't given much thought to it until high school theology class where I started to learn how the biblical stories were not history. Jesus wasn't born in December. He wasn't born in Bethlehem. Christianity co-opted the Pagan stories and I was ready then to leave religion.

Author Reza Aslan reminds us, "the Nativity stories, the stories of Jesus' birth that one finds in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, are beautiful, wonderful stories. They have a deep moral truth to them, but historically speaking are frankly ridiculous, that they are unhistorical to the extreme and so have to be understood less for the facts that they are presenting than for the truths that they are espousing."

Now before you write off the bible for not being historical, know that historical fiction is a newer form of literature. In fact, the Buddhist Sutras are not historical or scientific fact. There we run into children that are older than their fathers and other impossible tales. Stories have been told for their lessons throughout time. Not for logic, history or science. This notion of being counted felt almost miraculous. Romans were counting everyone. That felt noble and important. That part of the story is not true either. Rev. Erik just broke this news to me Thursday.

Aslan explains: "Luke creates this entire story of a census that the Roman Empire puts forth in the year 6 CE, and in this census all subject peoples of Rome have to go to the place of their father's birth and be counted. And in the case of Jesus' father, Joseph, that's Bethlehem. And so the great scene in which the pregnant Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem and they find no room in the inn, and they ultimately end up giving birth in a manger, is a wonderful story, but of course the historical flaws of it are too numerous to count.

First and foremost, while there was a census that Rome did at the time, the census had nothing to do with Galilee, which is where Jesus was from, and secondly, there is no documentation in any Roman source ever written, and the Romans were quite adept at documentation, particularly when it came to issues of taxation, which is after all what the census was for.”

Everyone hearing this story knew the story didn't happen. That wasn't the point. The early Christian community, who were only a generation or two removed from the events that Luke is talking about, knew that this census never happened, that under Roman law no one had to go to the place of their father's birth to be counted.”

If you are like me, you are sitting there thinking – the census wasn't to count everyone. NO. No, it was not. The Roman Empire did not have all the peasants and slaves stop working. Everyone did not stop work to go travel for days to be counted. There were no Motel 6's that were full.

Which made me realize, The Roman Empire had as much interest in truth in their census as the current administration has in the 2020 American Census. Our census determines fair redistricting, budgets for schools, clean water resources and so much more. It determines if our marginalized communities are counted and served.

Black communities across the United States have been undercounted for decades. The undercount is an acute problem for black men. Children, especially black children under 5 are also systematically undercounted. White communities are more likely to be **overcounted**. This differential counting in our census means that wealthier, white communities receive “more than their fair share” of resources and representation.

Our 2020 Census will still leave out most bisexual people, unpartnered gay men and lesbians, and transgender people—or, in other words, the vast majority of our LGBTQ community.

Questions about relationship status won't capture gender identity, thereby omitting transgender and gender non-binary people. And the lack of a distinct question about sexual orientation will erase the existence of bisexual people.

I think about how the best part of the Jesus stories is how he cared for the marginalized communities. His birth was a gift because we had this example of someone who healed the sick, fed the poor, loved the sinner and called out the government and leaders about unfair policies. Those were valuable stories.

I think about the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. As I look around at Black Lives Matter, the environmental catastrophe, the MeToo movement, the immigration crisis and so much more, I wonder if we are in the Apocalypse now? Are we living in one of the most advanced civilizations with so many problems centered around greed. And here we are, like the Romans, not doing an accurate census? We are trying not to count those who Jesus would have helped.

Tonight, on Christmas eve, it seems, we still need a miracle.

On Christmas eve, 2006 I sat in a candle lit sanctuary of a Unitarian Universalist earth holding my newborn baby. I realized then the whole Christmas story was about me and my baby and every other child born where we see a miracle of birth. The hope of the future.

As Lynn Ungar says,

I suspect that the abiding appeal of miracles has less to do with proof of divine powers given to a particular individual, such as Moses or Jesus, than with the prospect that the divine continues to show itself in our time and place, that however alienated or alienating the world may be, we're still deeply loved and noticed. Even to the point of natural laws being pushed aside for our benefit."

That night in the sanctuary I looked around at the wise elders sharing their wisdom. The ones that regaled me about stories of protests from before I was born and taught me to bring snacks and extra-large banners identifying ourselves at Unitarian Universalists to marches.

In the flickering candlelight, I saw the youth, giggling with old friends, home from college. The trees twinkled with decorations people had voluntarily put up. The sanctuary sparkled with love between couples old and new feeling the holiday magic. Old friends and new guests giggled and smiled. Children ran up to see my baby and ask when he was born and what his name was. I listened to the minister read in Luke about this child being the light of the world.

I realized then, like I do every year, we friends are the miracle.

Unitarian Universalism holds this love greater than us. We are a movement aiming to bring peace through pantheistic beliefs and acting out our faith. We concern ourselves more with doing than debating. We as Unitarian Universalists can be that light to others. We can bring a miracle to this world by our action and caring.

Look at the miracles sitting here. As you go out on this Christmas night, gaze up at the stars and know this faith, this community, this love, is bigger than a census, bigger than a story.

It is up to you to bring the light to others. You are the miracle.

May it be so.