

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
 Christmas Eve, 2009

### **Emmanuel: G\*d With Us**

Some of us are atheists. Some of us are Jews. A few of us are Christians, or aspire to act like Christians. We are Buddhist, Muslim, Pagan, more. Some of us are “other,” in more ways than one. We like to see the look on the face of the person to whom we hand back the form on which we've checked “other.” Tonight, we gather under the big tent of Unitarian Universalism, this mixed neighborhood in which many of us have taken sanctuary with a mixture of relief and joy; *all* are welcome here, even you. Even I. Unitarian: one god. Universalist: G\*d is love.<sup>1</sup>

... Except that some of us don't “do” G\*d. Try the Reggae translation: Unitarian: one love. Universalist: one heart. “One love, one heart. Let's get together and feel all right!”<sup>2</sup>

After surviving an attempt on his life in New York City, Bob Marley said, “The people who are making this world worse are not taking a day off! How can I?”<sup>3</sup> That's *it!* What you *say* you believe or don't believe: you can check it at the door. We're here in the beloved community to *live* our faith. We're here, living our faith, creating the beloved community. We're in the world for love, service, justice, peace.

“Love came down at Christmas,” writes English poet Christina G. Rossetti,<sup>4</sup>

Love came down at Christmas;  
 love all lovely, love divine;  
 love was born at Christmas,  
 stars and angels gave the sign.

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1 1 John 4:8

2 Bob Marley (with lyrics from Curtis Mayfield's *People Get Ready*), 1965 ... I think!

3 As recounted by a British Methodist Bishop in his anonymous blog. Please visit [methodistbishop.blogspot.com/2009/05/may-09.html](http://methodistbishop.blogspot.com/2009/05/may-09.html)

4 1830-1894

That's emmanuel; emmanuel means G\*d is with us. Love is with us. What if we really believed that, believed G\*d is with us, Love is with us, always, all ways? “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people....”<sup>5</sup>

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was a French aviator and author. If you never read *The Little Prince*, it's not too late! Much less well-known is his memoir, *Wind, Sand and Stars*. Saint-Ex was a pioneer of international postal flight in the early 1900s. He worked on the Aéropostale between Toulouse and Dakar, which took him right over the Sahara desert. Here's his story of emmanuel on an extraordinary night flight.

We had “slipped beyond the confines of this world,” he writes. “All that night, the radio messages ... concerning our position ... [sent] from the ports in the Sahara had been inaccurate.... [My radio operator,] Néri, and I had been drawn [off] course.... It was ... impossible for us to say how long we had been flying towards the high seas. Nor were we certain of making the coast, for our fuel was probably low. And even so, once we had reached it, we would still have to make port....

“We had no means of angular orientation,” he continues, “were already deafened, and ... growing blind. The moon, like a pallid ember, began to go out in the banks of fog. Overhead, the sky was filling with clouds, and we flew ... between cloud and fog in a world voided of all substance and light. The ports that signaled us had given up trying to tell us where we were. “No bearings, no bearings,” was all [they said]....

“With sinking hearts, Néri and I leaned out [of the plane], he on his side and I on mine, to see if anything, anything at all, was distinguishable in this void.... [Nothing.]

“And with that, we knew ourselves to be lost in interplanetary space among a thousand inaccessible planets, we who sought only the one veritable planet: our own.... Néri ... prayed to the stars....

“It was by the purest chance that we were saved,” he concludes. “... One by one, ... the airports had been waking each other up. Into our dialogue broke the voices of Agadir, Casablanca, Dakar ... gathering 'round us as 'round a sick-bed.... And suddenly into this conclave burst Toulouse, ... three thousand miles away, worried with the rest. Toulouse broke in without a word of greeting, simply to say sharply, “Your reserve tanks [are] bigger than [you realize]. You have two hours' fuel left. Proceed....”<sup>6</sup>

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5 Isaiah 40:1

6 Antoine de St. Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars*, pp. 15-19

Please memorize these words: *My reserve tanks are bigger than I realize.* Your reserve tanks are bigger than you realize! I know it's not how you expected to leave a Christmas Eve service, singing Reggae – *one love, one heart* – and repeating to yourself, “My reserve tanks are bigger than I realize.” But this is what we mean when we say *emmanuel*. *G\*d with us. Love with us.* Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.

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My father was plucked from an impoverished childhood by a minister who believed in him (Hello, Dr. Freud!). He played European classical music on the phonograph, sang opera, and read poetry ... to me. The year I turned ten, for Christmas, I memorized his favorite Robert Frost poems, and stood in the living room in front of the tree, reciting them to my adoring audience of one, the object of my deepest devotion.

And then I came home from school one day, and his closet was empty. He had left without explanation; he was gone. The house fell silent.

That dark New England winter, the snow fell long and deep. I was the oldest, a tomboy, and now, I reasoned, the "man" of the house. That meant shoveling snow.

Once, I awoke before dawn. A blizzard was raging. I bundled up and pushed open the front door against the wind and driving snow.

The snow was wet and heavy. My woolen mittens soaked through almost immediately. Remember woolen mittens?! My hands froze, and then went numb.

I shoveled desperately. For every pile I tossed to the side, the wind filled in the hole, throwing icy crystals against my frozen cheeks. My arms grew tired. My feet froze and burned. After I had been shoveling for more than an hour, as the swirling blackness gave way to grey, there was still no sign of my work.

I missed my father.

And then I heard a low hum. I kept shoveling. It grew louder, and I saw a huge plume of snow, up over the trees. I kept shoveling. It grew really loud, and the source of the noise came into view. Our two neighbors, Mr. Alcares and Mr. Brackett, were taking turns pushing the snow blower they shared through the storm.

I kept shoveling. And then they were beside me. "You did a great job!" they shouted into the roar of swirling snow. "We'll finish it up. Go on inside, now."

I nodded, and ran on frozen feet around to the back of the house, where I sat in the drifted snow on the stoop and wept. I cried tears of grief, tears of rage, fear, relief ... tears of gratitude.

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people. Your reserve tanks are bigger than you realize. G\*d is with us; love is with us: emmanuel.

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In 1513, almost 500 years ago tonight, Fra Giovanni Giocondo, a Franciscan monk, wrote a Christmas Eve blessing. Tonight, these words are for you:

I am your friend  
and my love for you goes deep.  
There is nothing I can give you  
which you do do not have,  
but there is much, very much  
that while I cannot give it,  
you can take.

No heaven can come to us  
unless our hearts find rest in today  
Take heaven!

No peace lies in the future  
which is not hidden  
in this present little instant.  
Take peace!

The gloom of the world  
is but a shadow.  
Behind it,  
yet within our reach,  
is joy.  
There is radiance and glory  
in the darkness  
could we but see —  
and to see, we have only to look.

I beseech you to look!  
[Take joy!]

... And so, at this time,  
I greet you ...  
with profound esteem  
and with the prayer  
that for you,  
now and forever,  
the day breaks,  
and the shadows flee away.

My spiritual companions ...

Unitarian: One god. Universalist: G\*d is love.  
One love, one heart.

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.  
Your reserve tanks are bigger than you realize.  
Take heaven! Take peace! Take joy!  
Welcome, Emmanuel.