

**“Near the Earth”**  
**by Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Appleton, Wisconsin**  
[www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)

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**Reading:** “Surplus” by Wislawa Szymborska (translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh)

A new star has been discovered,  
which doesn't mean that things have gotten brighter  
or that something we've been missing has appeared.

The star is large and distant,  
so distant that it's small,  
even smaller than others  
much smaller than it.  
Small wonder, then, if we were struck with wonder;  
as we would be if only we had the time.

The star's age, mass, location--  
all this perhaps will do  
for one doctoral dissertation and  
a wine-and-cheese reception  
in circles close to the sky:  
the astronomer, his wife, friends, and relations,  
casual, congenial, come as you are,  
mostly chat on earthbound topics,  
surrounded by cozy earth tones.

The star's superb,  
but that's no reason  
why we can't drink to the ladies  
who are incalculably closer.

The star's inconsequential.  
It has no impact on the weather, fashion, final score,  
government shake-ups, moral crises, take-home pay.

No effect on propaganda or on heavy industry.  
It's not reflected in a conference table's shine.  
It's supernumerary in the light of life's numbered days.

What's the use of asking  
under how many stars man is born  
and under how many in a moment he will die.

A new one.

"At least show me where it is."

"Between that gray cloud's jagged edge  
and the acacia twig over there on the left."

"I see," I say.

**Sermon:** "Near the Earth"

Once again, Christmas is coming. With it comes so much—shopping, decorating, cooking, traveling. But deeper messages also abound, like peace on earth and goodwill to all. These themes are well worn by now, the common stuff of Hallmark cards.

Yet it was not the greeting card industry that first helped popularize peace and human harmony as a Christmas message. In fact, it was the carol *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*, written almost 200 years ago by Unitarian minister Edmund Hamilton Sears. Innocuous and expected though it might seem now, this Christmas carol debuted to major controversy when it first greeted the public in the mid-1800s. It is in your hymnal but don't peek at the words. Later!

Sears was the minister at the First Congregational Church and Society in Wayland, Massachusetts, a Unitarian congregation. While he loved it there, Sears needed a larger, more prosperous church in order to support his family. After serving successfully in a bigger church for many years, he became seriously ill and fell into severe depression.

He recovered significantly but never recaptured his full energy and could no longer cope with the demands placed upon the minister of a large congregation. Nor did his voice ever fully rebound. In the days before so many sound amplification options, he was never again able to preach loudly enough for a large gathering to hear. Instead, he was recalled to the Wayland ministry and it was there in 1849, happily 'home,' that he shared a song for which he'd written lyrics years before.

It was based on the second chapter of the Book of Luke, which reads: "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Sears lifted the biblical reference to angels, who, in his day, were embodied messengers sent directly from God. He softened them, making them gentler and more graceful than the ferocious beings of Judaism and Hebrew Scripture. Today, of course, angels have multiple meanings or no meaning. Yet for many, they represent some element of higher truth we might cherish or follow.

*It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* hit the scene at a time when (and this is a little hard for me to imagine) Christmas carols themselves were considered too casual and modern to appear at church. The outraged public labeled this new Unitarian song of Sears' humanistic, secular and therefore disrespectful. I don't know about you, but learning that made me want to take a closer peek.

Its original tune was different than the one we know now. Sadly, that first music has since been lost. But we're still singing those words:

It came upon the midnight clear  
That glorious song of old  
From angels bending near the earth  
To touch their harps of gold:  
"Peace on the earth, goodwill to men

From heaven's all-gracious King."  
The world in solemn stillness lay  
To hear the angels sing.

My appreciation for this imagery comes from my mother, who grew up playing on the abundant rock formations of Prescott, Arizona. As a child, her landscape had none of the trees of the poem read by Peter. She would climb all the way up to the top of the rock pile in her front yard and sing this line to herself out loud. And then she would fling herself off, transformed by imagination into an angel with majestic wings. She would bend down, near the earth, to touch a shimmering golden harp that rested below.

Hearing about these rocks as I grew up, I was more than a little curious. The summer I turned sixteen, our family took a road trip to see where Mother spent much of her childhood. It was 116 degrees all week. I remember being pretty miserable in that rental car, although my dad has since implied that his misery came less from the heat and more from being stuck in an enclosed space with a surly teenager, but I digress...

Mom's right. Arizona has amazing rocks. Sturdy, intricate rocks that just beg you to clamor up their warm, craggy surface. These are rocks that make you think an angel could be perched on top, preparing for lift off. So my first association with our Christmas carol was those regal angels and their beautiful harps. But when I dug a little deeper, I found I'd missed the controversial part.

Can you spot it? It's in between the angels and their harps of gold—the fact that they are bending near the earth. This earth, inhabited not by angels but by humankind. By us. *This* is the controversy, and it was no accident. Sears zeroed in on humanity because he cared about this earthly mortal realm. And he cared about it in his current, present time, not in far way, ancient Bethlehem. This is precisely what made this carol so Unitarian, and what marks it as recognizably ours even today.

*It Came upon the Midnight Clear's* detractors haven't faded with time. It's still criticized by some Christians, who find it disconcertingly not Christian enough. And they have a point! They note that this song doesn't have anything to do with Jesus. How, they ask, can you have a religious Christmas carol that doesn't ever even mention Jesus? Indeed, if you attend a Christian celebration this year that includes this song, you might encounter a version with a rewritten last verse that gives Jesus and his birth a prominent role.

A Christmas carol scholar (yes, apparently that's a job and no, I didn't know that either) named Erik Routley studied the humanist theology of *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*. After our carol had been around for about a hundred years (this is in the mid-1900s), people were still bagging on Sears. Routley wrote scathingly that "in its original form, the hymn is little more than an ethical song, extolling the worth and splendor of peace..."

Can you imagine; an ethical song that cherishes peace? Surely not the worst insult! But *The New Yorker Magazine* of its day agreed with our esteemed Christmas carol scholar, opining that this song "was just the kind of thing that we can expect from those Unitarians."

Ironically, by today's Unitarian Universalist standards, Sears was an orthodox Christian. He believed Jesus was divine and that God worked directly through him and the angels. That's probably not what most of us in this room today believe. But I, at least, am totally on board with the conclusion he draws from all of this, which is that peace matters most of all. And he takes it even further. Peace, he says, is always and forever contingent upon human response.

Originally penned as an anti-war statement, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* was written by an angry Sears, driven to disgust by the Mexican War. Or, as it's known in Mexico, the American Invasion. Sears bitterly opposed the US annexation of Texas in 1845, which led to almost two years of bloody battling before the US successfully colonized much of what became the American Southwest.

Sears' song took in the killing and chaos. Still, despite the suffering of war, it insisted that the call to be peaceful and to practice goodwill was still just as loud and urgent in his day as it was on that Christmas midnight long ago, if we would all but listen "in solemn stillness." The verse which most clearly promotes human harmony is often softened and even downright excluded when sung today:

Yet with the woes of sin and strife  
The world hath suffered long;  
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled  
Two thousand years of wrong;  
And man, at war with man, hears not  
The love-song which they bring:  
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,  
And hear the angels sing.

Hear the angels sing, Sears implored so long ago. But what about now? Do angels even bother to sing to us now, as we prepare to wind down a year in which the US has seen well over 12,000 deaths due to gun violence, a generous handful of them just days ago in Colorado and Southern California? I'm not sure I can adequately express my disgust over this senseless slaughter and I won't try but I think Sears and his angels would say to us today just what they said when *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* was brand new.

They would demand that we stop complaining about the new Starbucks cup, stop holiday shopping, stop forwarding political memes that everyone on our social media feeds already agrees with, stop scurrying around and performing all the busy (and often important) tasks of our lives...and listen. In solemn stillness.

This is what the time of Advent asks of us. It is a season of waiting. Not expecting in the sense that we get to demand from the world a specific outcome. But waiting in the sense that the spiritual formation expert Enuma Okoro wrote about in her book called *Silence and Other Surprising Invitations of Advent*: "The more we inhabit silence, the better our hearing becomes. When we step back into the noise of our world, our hearing is a bit more fine tuned and more likely to catch God's whispers. In this way, we learn to stay awake and alert."

This is a good modern way to translate Sears. All those years ago he hoped that we would learn to keep silent, to stay awake and alert for ways to turn away from violence and toward human harmony. "When with the ever-encircling years/Shall come the time foretold," asks the song, "When peace shall over all the earth/Its ancient splendors fling and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing?"

I respect that Sears did not dull the impact of his lyrics by falling back on a cheesy, superficial ending. He can't reach across time and tell us when peace will prevail over senseless suffering and he doesn't pretend he can. Yet he does reassure me that humankind has and will always desire

peace, or maybe even expect it. This ancient, collective longing for peace may not always be visible at first glance, especially not in recent headlines and especially not at this frantic time of year.

The human impulse for peace gets forgotten, submerged under awkward work parties to which we have nothing to wear and buried by unreasonable expectations that this is finally the year we will finish all the handmade doll clothes before it gets too late. It gets lost amid hatred, bigotry, prejudice, greed and all our worst human impulses and systems. But it's there. If we listen closely enough, we will discover it waiting for us, desperate for us to hum along, to add our own verses to that age-old song.

May the song of the angels—who are, after all, only metaphors for that which is beautiful and present but sometimes hard to describe about humankind—truly become our human song, as it did for my mother, years ago and many states away. May we become our own angels, human angels, people of this world, demanding earthly peace on our own earthly behalf. We need not expect angels. We have ourselves and each other. Let our lives be songs of peace, here on our good earth.

May it always be so and may we sing now.