



UNTO YOU
THIS DAY
IS ALSO
BORN ...

OR, [NOT
PRECISELY A
CHRISTMAS
SERMON]

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon
Preached at Unity Church of North Easton
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Christmas, of course, is supposed to be the birth of God-in-the-flesh, the perfect God-man, the sinless saviour who never, in all his life, failed to do any good that could have been done; never failed to do what duty required; showed, in every instance, his greatness of character; never did any wrong, not even anything a little naughty.

How many people like that do *you* know — not to speak of being omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient! Can be a little hard to relate.

And no, Unitarians never saw Jesus quite that way, but some of the early Unitarians, and some even up through the 19th century, still thought that if he wasn't a God, he was a perfect, flawless human.

Unto you this day is born a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. UUs famously don't see him that way, but the birth of Jesus is important enough that it ordinarily overshadows a few other births at about this time.

So it's with a special pleasure that I introduce to you three more who were born at Christmas. Unto you is also born Isaac Newton, Clara Barton, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. I made you a special wreath — there they are on the second page of your Order of Service ranged around it!

THE READINGS

*Thomas Wentworth
Higginson, 1899 —*

“Oh, why,” said an exhausted American wife to her husband, “why do the insane so cling to you?” This tendency of every reform to surround itself with a fringe of the unreasonable and half-cracked is really to its credit, and furnishes one of its best disciplines. Those who are obliged by conscience to disregard the peace and proprieties of the social world, in the paths of reform, learn by experience what a trial they are to their friends by observing what tortures they themselves suffer from those who go few steps farther. They learn self-control by exercising moderation toward those who have lost that quality. Thomas Hughes, in his letters from America, describing some one whom he likes, adds, “He is doubtless, however, a cracked fellow, in the best sense,” — showing that, without a little crack somewhere, a [person] could hardly do his duty to the times. Thus it is that the insane cling to those who, though really sane, are content to be called crazy, — “fanatic named, and fool,” as [James Russell] Lowell wrote of [Wendell] Phillips in a sonnet.

Dryden wrote: —

“Great wits are sure to madness near allied,

And thin partitions do their bounds divide.”

The early anti-slavery meetings in particular were severely tested in respect to patience by those who might almost be called professional lunatics, as for instance Abby Folsom — Emerson's “flea of conventions” — with her shrill climax of all remarks, “It's the capitalists!” I have seen Abby Folsom led from the hall, courteously but decisively, by Wendell Phillips on the one side and a man yet living on the other, — she still denounc-

Continued 📖

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Personally, I find them a whole lot more like me. Sometimes I think, They're as screwy as I am!

And look what they did — *anyway*.

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Jesus of Nazareth is safely protected from the scrutiny of history. Since next to nothing is actually known about him, people have found him a fine mirror for the myth of the perfect human. There's a real value in that.

But I love these three. They, too, are incarnations of the Divine, just as you are, and the person next to you, and that stranger on the street.

And about these three, we know a whole lot more, and that includes their warts. Which is good, because the knowledge of what they achieved, together with the knowledge of what they struggled with and sometimes fell prey to, ought to give us a lot of hope and cheer.

They all belong to our religious tradition of Unitarians, Universalists, and Transcendentalists.

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The first two lived anguished and difficult lives; only the third ever seemed a particularly happy person, or was at all easy to get along with. Somewhere in the backs of our minds I think some little part of us still thinks lives like *ours* cannot qualify for any real encounter with destiny.

I have wanted for years of Christmases to celebrate these births and lives you never hear about at Christmas. The gospel of Unitarianism and Universalism introduces into the world light and truth and beauty and a kind of salvation. But the stories you will hear today don't always sound like the lives of the saints.

They *are* the lives of saints.

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The first was **ISAAC NEWTON**, born on Christmas Day 1642. His father died before he was born, but then, Jesus' father seems to have disappeared, so they had that in common. In school, young Isaac distinguished himself in carpentry.

But then his stepfather died, too, leaving the family destitute, so he went to work on the farm until an uncle noticed he was awfully bright and insisted he be sent to Cambridge to study. We don't really know what happened there except that he bought a prism. He wasn't a great Cambridge student because his humble schooling hadn't been very good preparation. But by the time he was graduated at 27, he was good enough to be appointed a professor of mathematics.

ing the capitalists as she reluctantly came towards the door. To the occasional policeman present, for whom the abolitionists themselves seemed as much lunatics as their allies, the petty discrimination of putting out only the craziest must have appeared an absurdity; Wendell Phillips at that very meeting had to explain the real distinction, — namely, that he and his friends were not the object of persecution because they were crazy, but because they were known not to be.

In truth, even to this day, one rarely finds a country town in which there is not some . . . person . . . who is so near the verge of sanity as rather to rejoice in the freedom of observation and speech that it implies. "I am," said a lady of this description to me, "the only person in this place who can afford to tell people the absolute truth."

From: Thomas Wentworth Higginson.
Contemporaries.

Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1899,
excerpted from "The Eccentricities of
Reformers," pp. 329-348.

Sri Aurobindo

[We are meant] to grow more and more until we grow into our own fullness of self; all birth is a progressive self-finding, a means of self-realisation. To grow in knowledge, in power, in delight, love and oneness, towards the infinite light . . . , to universalise ourselves till we are one with all being, and to exceed constantly our present limited self till it opens fully to the transcendence in which the universal lives . . . , that is the full evolution of what now lies darkly wrapped or works half-evolved in Nature.⁶

For the next 27 years he hardly left Cambridge, devoting himself to studying and lecturing on optics, geometry, and algebra.

In 1692 there was a curious story that his dog had knocked over a lamp — though later it came out that the dog had nothing to do with it — and that 20 years' research in optics was destroyed. One story says he bore the catastrophe with complete calm. Another says he became insane.

During these years he was making great discoveries about light and optics and universal gravitation. But he had such an intense dread of criticism or opposition that he kept his discoveries to himself.

He began his work on gravitation in the 1660s and, after several years' effort, his calculations worked. But he didn't tell anybody.

During the 1680s the astronomer Edmund Halley was working on the same problem and somehow heard that Newton had already figured it all out. Halley managed to get Newton's astonishing manuscript and paid to have it printed, under the title *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*. It was the most important scientific work there had ever been, revealing the laws of solid and fluid motion with their application to the movements of the heavens, the tides, and the procession of equinoxes. “No work on any branch of human knowledge was ever destined to effect . . . such important consequences.”¹

Next he worked on differential calculus, or what he called Fluxions, but — as it happens — so did the great Leibniz. Leibniz, though, worked openly and announced his findings; Newton worked secretly. In the end, there was a big fight over who deserved the credit, and Newton behaved rather badly.

A morbid fear of opposition from others ruled his whole life. Even a little opposition was enough to drive him to secrecy or just to give up, and destroyed his peace. As one biographer put it,

A discovery of Newton was of a two-fold

character — he made it, and then others had to find out that he had made it.²

In later years, he was elected and re-elected President of the Royal Society, which he ruled as a fearsome despot, unable to bear criticism. His loyal subjects were obsequious; the others he managed to exclude from the Royal Society. Yet there was no greater a mathematician or theoretical thinker.

I said he was a Unitarian, didn't I? He kept that secret, too; — *but* one must remember that throughout his life it was *illegal* to be a Unitarian. A man was hanged in 1696 for denying the Trinity. Then King William relaxed the penalties; now, for the first offence you were simply shut out from “holding any place of trust” and for the second you got three years' imprisonment.³ So the few who dared write against the Trinity — particularly the Unitarian pamphlets that were appearing in those days — published without even a printer's name, and always wrote in rather evasive terms.

But Isaac Newton produced works of Unitarian theology, that read a lot like the writings of that other Unitarian theologian, Joseph Priestley. His closest associates were Unitarian. But, like the rest of the light Newton shed on the world, he did his best to do a bushel-act with it.

In the early 1690s Newton sent Locke, who sympathized with Unitarianism, a copy of a manuscript arguing for the Unitarian view. When Locke wanted to publish it, Newton got scared and withdrew it. There *were* bolder British Unitarians then, like Thomas Fyshe Palmer, exiled for his views to Botany Bay, Australia; or Gilbert Wakefield, jailed at Dorchester. Isaac Newton was a cautious Unitarian, and a very, very nervous one, too. He *saw* more than he dared *say*.



Next, ranged about our Christmas wreath, is **CLARA BARTON**, born on Christmas Day in 1821 — into a solid Universalist family in

Oxford, Massachusetts.

And at the Oxford Plains Universalist Church she heard the gospel of universal love and of a God who writes nobody off but but finally, somehow, saves everybody. She heard about a God who wanted them to abolish slavery, and extend full rights and dignity to women.

But Clara herself was locked in a prison of morbid shyness. They tried putting her in a public school, and then a private one, only to have to withdraw her. So the family became her school, too, and they did the job brilliantly. Her parents and two brothers and three sisters taught her geography, literature, carpentry, the classics, horsemanship, sewing, Latin, and military strategy. As a result, for awhile —she came out of her shy shell.

But then a brother fell off a barn, and Clara was assigned the job of nursing him. She barely left his bedside for two years. The isolation drove her back into her frightened shell.

It took an outbreak of smallpox to pull her out of that shell. She fell sick early in the outbreak, and recovered, so now she was immune to the disease, and became a kind of nurse to the whole town. That brought her out of her paralyzing fear of people or feelings of inadequacy — and now she could go to school, and soon she qualified to *teach* school, which she did with distinction.

Then in 1850, at 29, she headed off to Clinton Liberal Institute, which was a coeducational Universalist seminary in New York. After that her job was to organize a new school in Bordentown, New Jersey. She recruited kids off the street — 600 kids — but she was denied the principal's job because of her sex and fell into a depression as she watched an incompetent man run the school into the ground. She quit and took a job at the Patent Office in Washington. Always lurking, there was the depression, driven aside only by some urgent

mission.

That's when things in Washington started heating up. The Taney Supreme Court ruled that black people have no rights that a white person is obligated to respect. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner began his heroic campaign against slavery. He and a bunch of abolitionists, Transcendentalist-types, and reformers organized the Republican Party, which she joined immediately. The Southern states seceded. The war began.

The sight of wounded and dying soldiers finally sealed her mission in life. There was not, in the United States, one single trained nurse. It was her moment. She had to argue hard with the Surgeon General to get recognized as the first, but at last she arrived at Culpeper, Virginia, where a bloody battle had been fought, and began caring for the wounded of both sides. And then Alexandria, and Fairfax, and Bull Run, and Harper's Ferry and Sharpsburg and Antietam. She gained renown as the Angel of the Battlefield.

After the war she located thousands of missing Union soldiers, living and dead. And she entered the Lyceum lecture circuit, speaking to hundreds of audiences.

Unlike Isaac Newton, Clara Barton was free to speak her views without fear of hanging or imprisonment. Which she did.

In Iowa once, in 1867, the poster advertising her lecture described her as “not after the style of Susan B. Anthony and her clique; Miss Barton does not belong to that class.” Clara Barton saw that poster and ended her address with this:

That paragraph . . . does worse than to misrepresent me as a woman; it maligns my friend. It abuses the highest and bravest work ever done in this land. You glorify the women who made their way to the front to reach you in your misery, and nurse you back to life. You called us angels. Who opened the way for women to go and made it possible? Who but that detested 'clique' who through years of opposition, obloquy, toil and pain

had openly claimed that women had rights, should have the privilege to exercise them. . .

And, soldiers, for every woman's hand that ever called back life to your perishing bodies, you should bless God for Susan B. Anthony, Cady Stanton, . . . and their followers. . . ."⁴
"And," recorded Miss Barton later, "the very windows shook in their casements" with the applause.

She was never so fulfilled as when caked with blood saving lives. So the end of the war brought back the depression and she set out for Europe. And there she met members of the International Red Cross. And listen to this: *They wanted to know why the United States was refusing to sign the Geneva Convention!* — A treaty that ensured that ambulances and field hospitals, and the personnel involved with them — would be treated as neutrals, and that the wounded should be cared for whether they fell in hostile or friendly territory. She learned that 32 nations had signed on. Now she had another mission, which she pursued through the administrations of three presidents until America signed the treaty and an American Red Cross was established, and its first president was Clara Barton.

In later years she became President for Life of the Red Cross, and, in that position, was quite an insufferable autocrat and grew suspicious and rigid.

Finally she let go — retired, in 1905, and her last years were passed in peace, the rivalries ended, and in these eight years of quiet and happy contemplation and writing, the depression finally was banished. She died in 1912, at ninety. It took her a lifetime, but Clara Barton finally achieved peace; the great nurse finally healed herself.



But who is this third, seated round the wreath? That's **THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON**. Born on *this very day* in 1823. You will not likely have heard of him anywhere except this pulpit. He went to Harvard and became Uni-

tarian minister in Newburyport. Which was the biggest and richest port after Boston, home of great shipbuilders and merchants.

While he was in Newburyport, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed into law and fugitive slaves escaped from the South were captured in Boston. Higginson joined Theodore Parker's Vigilance Committee, set up to rescue the fugitives and send them along the Underground Railway to Canada. He wrote abolitionist columns for Newburyport and Boston newspapers. This made his wealthy congregation nervous.

Then there was his Thanksgiving sermon in 1848. They didn't like the part where he said:

Another presidential election has just passed. The plans I spoke of long ago . . . to place another slaveholding president at the head of this nominally free republic have been . . . consummated . . . with the consent and approval, nay the enthusiasm, of a majority of you. . . . Do you not see that by your expressions of delight at the result of the election, you have voluntarily foregone all the defense you had when you endlessly lamented for the "necessary evil, . . ." you have accepted the triumph as your triumph, and rejoiced over it and for that you are now to be held accountable.

He went on to ask in effect — And hey, merchants, how about the cargo your ships are carrying that nobody's supposed to talk about — I mean, the human cargo, hmmn?

In Higginson's day you could speak your views without fear of execution or imprisonment, but you could get fired.

If you were in those pews, how would you have responded?

He was too much for the merchants of Newburyport. He knew he had no prospect of work, but it seemed as if fear never stopped him.

And whaddayaknow, a new independent congregation of Transcendentalist bent, was being formed in Worcester, one of those

radical congregations of Unitarians who had been thrown out of the American Unitarian Association and were affiliated with Theodore Parker's church. These were known as "Jerusalem Wildcats." They called Higginson to Worcester to be their minister.

While he was there, the fugitive slave Anthony Burns was seized in Boston, and held at the Federal Courthouse. With Theodore Parker and Wendell Phillips, Higginson organized a mass rally at Fanieul Hall. Right in the middle of it a signal was to be given and everyone was to rush the Courthouse and rescue Anthony Burns. It all went wrong; the signals got crossed and the rescue failed. But throughout his life Higginson would proudly wear a facial injury he gained in the attempt.

The War to make Kansas a free state drew Higginson from Worcester to lead hundreds of men as "brigadier-general" of the "Free State Forces of Kansas." He raised money and armaments for John Brown, for which he was almost imprisoned, and surely would be today. He commanded a black regiment in the Civil War.

In later life, he poured out a stream of books and established himself as a major literary figure.



I was taught that the problems of the world, and of the soul, were solved once and for all in that one birth, and life, and death, two millennia ago. But the struggles of the world, and of our lives, continue and confront us still.

And we, with our own ragged lives — may find some comfort in idealizing the life of Jesus — or, perhaps, as surely happened in their time, those of Newton or Barton or Higginson. But the truth is, the more we know of them, the more we may see ourselves in them, and themselves in us.

There is light in us which, for our own reasons, sometimes not at all healthy reasons, we may seek to hide. Why did Isaac Newton so doubt his own work that he so feared con-

tradiction?

There is darkness in us, and we have our anguished moments. Why did it take Clara Barton so long to find peace?

There is truth and passion in us, and a vision we earnestly want to make real in our lives and the world. Why were our own fellow Unitarians so afraid of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, so nervous about his campaigns against the greatest wrongs of his age?



But here we sit, people trying to find the meaning and purpose of our lives, trying to figure out what we're meant to be, to reckon the cost of being what we ought to be, hoping we don't stumble over our own dark shadows so badly that we can't fulfill our particular calling in life.

We're quick to dismiss ourselves and dismiss each other. Or so afraid that *our own* work and thought isn't sound that we sometimes feel threatened by the work and thought of *others*. The fears, the depressions, the jealousies, the hesitation and anxiety — not our finest qualities. But if we own those things, hold them lovingly — they don't have to disqualify us from the race we have to run. For Newton, Barton, and Higginson — it was their very wounds and vulnerabilities that opened their hearts and fired their brilliant visions that drove their work.

And sometimes it's good — on a day like this one — to celebrate. Celebrate these lives of ours. Celebrate our anguish-ridden sister Clara, our suspicious, fearful brother Isaac; celebrate the happy, daring life of T.W. Higginson — and, seeing all that they were *in ourselves*, and seeing *ourselves in them* — celebrate these lives of *ours* — what they have been, and are, and shall be.

The call that comes to us does not require that we be perfect, or even ready. Only that we rise up, and set forth.

¹ Augustus de Morgan. *Essays on the Life and Work of Newton*. Chicago and London: Open Court Publishing, 1914, p.23.

² de Morgan, 38.

³ Octavious Brooks Frothingham. *Theodore Parker: A Biography*. Boston: James R. Osgood and Company (Late Ticknor & Fields, and Feilds, Osgood, & Co., if one cares), 1874, p. 425.

⁴ Robert S. Wolley. "Clara Barton, A Biographical Sketch of Compulsion." *The Annual Journal of the Universalist Historical Society*, I:1959, 19-21.

⁵ *Involution and Evolution*, EA 82.

⁶ *Involution and Evolution*, EA 82. Readings

MEDITATION & SILENCE

On this wet, grey winter's day, we gather here to be renewed, to claim to ourselves meaning, and comradeship, and hope.

Before us is a new year demanding choices, requiring discernment, a weighing of ultimate commitment.

Behind us are achievements and failures, fulfilments and disappointments, joy and pain.

All these things we bear within ourselves today.

Even as the days now lengthen, let some light, some holy fire, stir among this baggage we bring, and make of this menagerie of strength and vulnerabilities the very resources for our living into this future where now our paths lead.

Let what must be remembered rise in our awareness, and let what must be forgotten fall away, and let the true, and the good, and the beautiful, and the holy — claim our hearts and minds

In trust, in hope, in love

In this silence. . . .