

CHRISTMAS EVE, DECEMBER 24, 1999
Rev. Helen Zidowecki

GREETERS: Sara Halperin, Maggie Kennedy, Doug Findlay

PRELUDE Christmas Carols, Hannah Faulkner

While we do not have nursery care available, the Nursery is open if needed.

CHALICE LIGHTING Linda Findlay, lights

The flames of the candles we light tonight are reflections of the star, the heavenly light brought to earth. May this Christmas Chalice bring the magic and wonder of the celebration to us as we are gathered here. HZ

The light which shines is the light of the season,
Which comes to us from the past, which shines here now.
Which we shall give to the future.
(Christopher Raible, *Christmas Anthology*, p.284)

LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH Linda Findlay lights

Advent has come full circle. It has been the time of preparation, preparation for Christmas, the time of healing, rebirth, and celebration. Let us light the Advent candles for this last time this year, carrying with us the messages of the candles and wreath as we prepare to celebrate.

The First Candle is for **Faith**. This community reinforces the faith that our existence makes a difference, that we are important, that we are integral parts of the human experience.

The Second Candle is for **HOPE**. Hope comes as we talk with each other and realize our common experiences, our humanity, our caring, reassurances of our own worth, given and received.

The Third Candle is for **LOVE**. We cannot go back into isolation once we have given or received love. Love is the creative force.

The Fourth Candle is for **JOY**. Joy is the celebration of the creation and

of life itself.

The wreath is for **PATIENCE**. Patience is the ability to allow events to unfold in their good time and with their own lessons.

*SINGING 228 Once in Royal David's City
Hannah will play each carol through once before we sing.

TIME FOR ALL AGES "The Story" (Linda Findlay, Manger Manager)
Christmas is the celebration of the life of Christ. That's what birthdays are, a celebration of a person. Most of our birthdays are celebrated with friends and relatives. It's not very often that birthdays turn into holidays. That happens because the person affects many people for the good. Holidays usually become holidays after the person has died! That makes holiday birthdays a time of remembering what the life of the person means.

I'd like to tell the story tonight with the use of the crèche, or manger scene. This particular manger scene is one that my mother gave me. It is made of wood and came from Bethlehem, where this story takes place. Story is in three parts:

Scene One: The Trip to Bethlehem

Every 10 years in this country we take a census, which is count of people. Here, we get forms in the mail and sometimes are interviewed. 2000 years ago, the Roman Emperor wanted a census and told people to go -- actually travel -- to where they or their parents had been born. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth and needed to go the Bethlehem. (I don't know the distance they had to travel. Let's say that it was the distance between here and Waterville. That is about 20 miles and takes us less than a half-hour. But Mary rode on a donkey and Joseph walked. Can you imagine walking to Waterville?) And did I mention that Mary was about 9 months pregnant! Not a pleasant trip.

When they got to Bethlehem, there were people everywhere! (Think of everyone in all of the towns where we live coming to Augusta at the same time. People jam! And there were no rooms in the inns. Utter chaos! Finally, someone said that they could put the donkey in the stable

behind the inn and could also stay there with the donkey -- and other animals. (Have you been in stables or barns?) They got inside and settled in. It was warm, and when the doors closed, the confusion outside was shut out. Sometime during the night, the baby was born. Suspecting that this might happen, Mary may have brought blankets or cloth to wrap the baby in. The trough that the animals feed from --called a manger -- was used for his crib. And probably Mary, Joseph and the baby fell asleep from all the events.

From the chaos, we get a picture of peace.

Scene Two: The shepherds.

In the hills around Bethlehem, there were shepherds with their flocks of sheep. We don't have large sheep flocks in this part of the country, but the shepherds had to make sure that wild animals or thieves didn't harm or steal the sheep at night. This evidently was a usual night -- for awhile. Then something happened. There was great light. (Did any of you see the moon the last few nights? It was almost like daylight. Think of the light of many moons--shining on you.) This light blinded the shepherds. They thought that they heard voices that they attributed to angels telling them that a very special baby had been born in the town, and that they should go and see him. And the light disappeared. (I'm not sure about you, but I would have wondered if I were going out of my mind. That's because we try to explain everything. The shepherds, being close to the earth and knowing that not all things can be explained, accepted that this had happened for some reason.)

Some shepherds -- not all of them because the sheep still had to be protected -- went to Bethlehem. The light that they had seen had become a bright star that led them to the stable. Inside, they found Mary and Joseph and the baby. There was something special about this that maybe even the shepherds did not understand. But they told everyone that they met of their experience.

On a night that seemed so usual, they had had a spiritual experience around the wondrous event of the birth of a baby. And they weren't afraid to talk about the experience.

Scene Three. The wise man

In a country further away, there were three men who were members of the Zoroastrian priestly caste, a religious system in Persia (now Iran) that focused on the struggle between forces of light and darkness. From their study of the stars, they knew that something special had happened. They saw a bright star -- the power of light -- and followed it, getting information that Bethlehem would be the place that a special baby would be born. They probably didn't have much trouble finding Mary, Joseph and the baby. After all, the shepherds had told everyone they met.

Now vision this. Three men who were probably reasonably wealthy, probably wearing clothing that was somewhat different than people wore in Bethlehem. People may have stopped to watch them. The wise men brought gifts that they would give to a king, like gold (real gold); and the incenses of frankincense and myrrh. After they had seen the baby, they left for home.

They were willing to follow their spiritual quests, even if it meant going to someplace different and not knowing all of the answers.

Just look for a moment, quietly, and think of all that happened around the manger!

And let us continue to reflect on this as we sing.

SINGING 243 "Jesus, Our Brother" (Sitting)

We will sing the first verse through, as is. On the next verses, after the first section that tells the kind of animal, Hannah will pause, and you can make the noise that the animal would make. And we'll finish the verse. At the end, you can make the sound again. For the last verse, make the noise of any animal that you want.

OFFERING As is our tradition, the Christmas Eve service offering is given to special programs. This year it will be divided between the Dayspring AIDS Support Services and the Domestic Violence Shelter.

Chris Clark, Maggie Kennedy

OFFERTORY "Away in a Manger" (Adapted) (Sitting)

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
 The little baby Jesus laid down his sweet head.
 The stars in the bright sky look'd down where he lay,
 The little baby Jesus, asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
 But little baby Jesus no crying he makes.
 They love baby Jesus, all those kneeling by,
 They stay by his cradle, 'til morning is nigh.

The little baby Jesus a teacher will be,
 To show us how to love, and from envy be free.
 May all little children receive tender care,
 Preparing them for service in life, everywhere.

(From *Christmas Anthology*, adapted)

REFLECTION: "This Holy Night; The Night of Wholeness"

When we go back to the old English and Germanic roots, we will find that "holy" and "wholly" are derived from the same root words and concepts of being whole, healing and sacred.

The Essenes, a group of Jews to which Jesus may have belonged, focused their lives on relationship with God. They believed that every 2000 years a new energy force come into human existence. The energy force that came 2000 years ago was love, "Love of one human being for another simply because they are worthy of love and are a valued part of the same human family." The life and teachings of Jesus were filled with love that makes people whole.

Regardless of the stories and historical arguments regarding whether Jesus was the Righteous Teacher that the Essenes thought was coming, he grew up surrounded by the sense of wholeness, with a power greater than himself, with healing of the body by touching a person's spirit, by the power that he had within himself.

Some people who practice some of the Essene ways today are looking for a new infusion of love energy this millenium, the concept that "we

are all one." Another level of wholeness, the wholeness that we celebrate tonight. This is a holy night.

SPECIAL MUSIC: "O Holy Night!" sung by Dan Sorensen, accompanied by Bill Goldberg

REFLECTION "Birth of Our Liberal Faith"

Since the appearance of Jesus on the religious scene, there have been two ways to consider him. One is looking at his teachings and his actions. This is the religion *of Jesus*. Because of his life, stories and theologies have developed *about Jesus*, the second way of considering him. Our faith tradition is more a religion *of Jesus*. The affirmations in our principles definitely reflect his teachings:

- *The inherent worth and dignity of every person.* Repeatedly, Jesus related to people of all parts of society, at their level of need.
- *Justice and compassion in human relations.* It was his social justice activities that got Jesus in trouble.
- *Acceptance of spiritual growth and search for truth and meaning.* He challenged the spiritual leaders, he stated that "the truth shall make you free," and he repeatedly left the scene of action for times of mediation and prayer.

It was after his death that he was called Christ, the anointed one, someone who was very special. Tonight, as we start Christmas, of the "The festival of Christ," let us remember that there is no higher calling than to work for wholeness through love, justice and a sense of being one. This is our festival, this is our challenge. The work is not complete. This is a time of promise and progress rather than completion. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow reflects that in our next carol.

*SINGING: 240 "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"

REFLECTION: "Birth – and Rebirth"

We all need birthdays. These are the times, when we are children, that we look forward to the markers that show that we are getting bigger. As we get older, we sometimes even try to ignore the birthday. But this is a time for us to reflect on our lives, and to accept the appreciation of those

who celebrate with us. Birthdays are a time of recreation, of rebirth, of rededication.

No one knows when Jesus was actually born, neither the year of the date. But the celebration is placed at a very holy time of the year by ancient traditions: winter solstice, when the energy of the sun begins to return as the days gradually get longer. This is a recreation, a regeneration. New energy, hope.

I invite you to join in a reflection of wholeness, of the importance of our affirmations not only to us but also to the world, and a calling to renewal that is part of the Christmas message.

As we move into a time of reflection, please join in the responsive reading.

RESPONSIVE READING Tracy Pullman, from *Christmas Anthology*
Christmas Eve is a time for candlelight.

It is a time when one desires nothing more than family and soft music.
Who can say what passes through our hearts on Christmas Eve?
Strange thoughts, undefinable emotions, and sudden tears –
All this and more, unbidden, come without reason.

*And we burn our candles
For this is Christmas Eve.*

Christmas Eve is not a time to be merry, but quietly glad.
It is the proper time to wish upon a star.
It is the time to watch children with excited eyes troop off to bed to await the miracle of dawn.
It is a time of wonder, of thankfulness that life is still being created anew out of darkness.

It is a time of quiet awakening to beauty that still lives on through the strife of war-torn world.

*And we burn our candles
For this is Christmas Eve.*

Christmas Eve is a time of heartbreak,
When those who are not at their own firesides are most missed.

Christmas Eve is a time of blessing
When all the heartbroken world gives thanks
For the quiet beauty of rest.
When one is closest to one's companions
And is not then enemy to any person.

*And we burn our candles
For this is Christmas Eve.*

Christmas Eve is a time of memory,
When one remembers past happiness and love
And often sighs for the good that might have been.
Peace on earth, and now comes the memory of the story of the first
Christmas, so old, and yet so new.
It lives again in the memory of human hearts.

*And we burn our candles
For this is Christmas Eve.*

Christmas Anthology, p. 268

LIGHTING OF CANDLES

Those who may be affected by the lighting of the candles may wish to move into the hallway or parlor. Lighting will be from the center aisle. Would the candle lighters please come forward?

SINGING: "What Child is This?"

What Child is this, who laid to rest, On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, While shepherds watch are keeping?

This, this is Jesus Christ, whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary!

So bring him incense, gold and myrrh, Come peasant king to own him.
The king of kings salvation brings, Let loving hearts enthrone him.
Raise, raise the song on high, the mother sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy, for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary!

CANDLELIGHT REFLECTION *The light is not only from the candles but also from the inner light that we all have. If you would like*

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to share a thought, a wish, a joy, a sorrow, please feel free to do so, from where you are sitting.

*SINGING: "Silent Night" (Insert)

EXODUS TO THE FELLOWSHIP HALL *Please extinguish your candles, and follow the lights (electric, Linda and Helen) in procession to the Fellowship Hall.*

[Surround the table with the Birthday Cake.]

SINGING:

"Happy Birthday -- dear Jesus"

Thanks to those who assisted with the service.

"We Wish You A Merry Christmas" (Insert)

Other assistance (than noted in the service).

CANDLES: Elva Ingraham

PLANTS: Linda Findlay

*Please stand as you are willing and able.

[Major reference: *Celebrating Christmas: An Anthology*, Edited by Carl Seaburg, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, 1983.]