

Christmas Evensong, 2004

Welcome

Prelude

Opening Words

We are here
to worship in the deep, dark night,
and sing with the circling constellations
as we once again think with our hearts
and feel with our minds
on the ancient winter festival of Christmas.

And so we pray together

**(all) And may both the light of our learning
and the light of our love guide us like stars,
like candles through the night.
Blest is that imagination which insists that
tomorrow's peace might begin today on earth,
when we act in good will toward all.**

Kindling of the Grail

Carol Prayer #225

Nocturne:

The year ends soon. The year ends.
The noise and bombast of it,
the sadness and twists within it are now enveloped
and muffled by this silent and cold night.
A finger is put to the year's trembling lips. Sh...sh...
The stars add not a word.
The candles shed the gift of their light quietly,
asking nothing in return,
and the window panes reflect it back
without even a whispered commentary.
The ice and snow have blanketed
our whole local world,
and the slight crunch of our footstep

barely echoes through the crystal branches.
The darkness comforts and holds us.
To and fro, up and down are no more,
their rush, rush, rush now sleeping quietly,
cradled in the soothing arms of mother silence.
Stars, keep your peace.
Breath, move slowly now.
Silence, beautiful starlit silence,
we bow in welcome.

Silence for a Time

Music and Reading written by the late Sophia Fahs, one of the foremost religious educators among us.

Song: Each night a child is born
is a holy night.
A time of singing, a time for wondering.
A time for worshipping. Each night a child is born,
is a holy night.

*For so the children come and so they have been
coming. Always in the same way they come,
born of the seed of a man and woman.
No angels herald their beginnings,
No prophets predict their future courses.
No magi see a star to show where to find
the babe that will teach humankind.
Yet each night a child is born is a holy night.
Fathers and mothers sitting beside their children's cribs feel glory in the sight of a new
life beginning.
They ask "Where and how will this new life end?
Or will it ever end?"*

Each night a child is born
is a holy night.
A time of singing, a time for wondering.
A time for worshipping. Each night a child is born,
is a holy night.

Reading from Luke's Gospel book, produced toward the end of the first century by an unknown Gentile author now named Luke, who may have written out of the city of Ephesos, on the coast of what is now Turkey.

And so it happened that Caesar Augustus declared a universal census for taxing purposes. This was the first one of its kind, remember? The one taken while Quirinius was Prefect over all Syria. Everyone used to return to their own ancestral city to be placed on the rolls. And so Joseph left The Galilee, Nazareth to be exact, and traveled down south to Judea, to his birthplace of Bethlehem, David's legendary home. He traveled there with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

And, thus it was that while they were lodging in Bethlehem, Mary delivered her firstborn son. She wrapped him up tight according to custom and had to use a cattle-feeder for his first crib, since they could find no other privacy in the place where they were staying.

Carol #233

Reading: *Luke continued*

Nearby, shepherders were keeping their night watch over their flocks. Suddenly a divine messenger came to them, as a majestic light shone around them. This frightened them out of their wits.

But the messenger said to them: "Don't be scared. For, listen, I have Good News for you today! In David's town, a child is born for you, a Savior who is anointed by God. And this is how you will recognize him: you will discover a child all wrapped up tight and laying in a cattle-feeder."

Suddenly, the messenger was surrounded with a whole chorus of heaven, who sang praises this way: "The True Glory of God Most High... is Peace and Good Pleasure among people on earth."

Then the chorus vanished. And the shepherders hurried to Bethlehem, and there they found Mary and Joseph, and, as they were told, a baby asleep in a cattle-feeder.

Carol #231

Reading *from Matthew's Gospel; produced, we think, in Syria toward the end of the first century in our era.*

Now after Jesus had been born in Bethlehem of Judea, back during the reign of King Herod, a party of Persian astrologers, Magi, suddenly arrived at Jerusalem, asking "Where can we find the newborn Prince of Judea? You see, we saw his star rise, and we have come to pay him all due respect."

King Herod was perplexed by this question, as were the other citizens of Jerusalem, since Herod had not recently fathered a son. So Herod convened a meeting of all the leading priests

and scholars among the people, asking them to discern from the sacred texts where such an anointed child might have been elsewhere born.

The answer they gave: “In Bethlehem, for we found this saying in the scroll of the prophet: ‘You, o Bethlehem in the South, are by no means the least important town in the land, for it is from within your walls that a leader shall arise that shall be as a shepherd to my people.’”

Herod then summoned the magi for a private audience. He asked them when and where the signet star had first risen, and then sent them off to Bethlehem with the request that they might send him news of the child’s whereabouts, so that he too might go and pay his “due respect.”

After the audience was finished, they departed south for Bethlehem, the star which they had first seen as a morning star now going before them, moving until it finally stopped over the house where the child was living. The sight of the star made them very glad indeed. When they entered the house, they found the little boy alongside Mary, his mother. They bowed solemnly toward the child as toward a sovereign, and then opened the treasure boxes they had brought with them, filled with gold, myrrh, and frankincense.

That night, the magi dreamed they heard a message warning them not to return to King Herod, so they went back east to Persia following a different route.

Duet

Reading *This is a tanka, a poem of five lines in the Japanese tradition, written by Herwig Verleyen*

This immense silence.
A snowflake falls.
Another falls on top of it.
The world is nothing more
than a faraway whisper.

Music

Homily

More snow fell this week than has ever fallen in a single day in all my seven years in Columbus. It was not a mere dusting, like we had last year. It was not a thin sheet like the year before. It was an alarmingly thick stack of over-stuffed quilts that sealed up the earth, and wrapped the trees in crystal.

When I stood in my office yesterday watching the sun set through those glass branches, shedding its flamingo light on the blue snow, I thought I had seen all the beauty which the

world can offer me in one quick vision. I was talking on the phone at the time, but had to stop to watch the marvel in front of me. The colors! The sparkling! The world that I thought I knew, noisy and demanding, was, in the words of the *tanka* poet, nothing more than a faraway whisper.

Oh, don't get me wrong. I well *know* that such snow and ice can be dangerous. Beauty, I've learned, is often linked to danger and to risk. To take a step forward on such a day is to risk falling. I know that. I fell on the ice today myself, although fortunately, I did not hurt myself.

But for me, the Christmas stories are a lot like that snow and ice. They too are inexplicably beautiful, like the lavender shadows cast long and deep upon the white snow, or the rosy crystal of the branches. They too turn the noisy world into but a far away whisper.

But the Christmas stories too are associated with danger. The danger of facing our own selves in their mirror. The danger of taking ourselves seriously and making choices.

I do think it's harder to see that now, very clearly, 1900 years after these legends were first set down. After all, we don't wear togas anymore, and they did when these stories were first written. Our Latin is confined to a few phrases, like "i.e. = id est," or, on our money, "*E Pluribus Unum*." And our Greek has evaporated completely unless we are part of the symphony chorus singing some Mass by Bach, *Kyrie Eleison*. Furthermore, the history of all the Caesars is almost forgotten, the knowledge of first century politics and religion confined to a few graduate school minds at most in this our most modern world.

But strange as it is, after many decades of not liking Christmas, all of sudden, the ancient story is fresh again. After years of squirming at the claimed miracles and strange angels, Christmas rocks. The graduate historians who study the Caesars do not take away my Christmas, they give it back to me, all the more amazing.

You see, when these stories were written, the authors were not really trying to tell us "what really happened." They really didn't know, nor did they share my modern need for documented accuracy. Luke, for example, makes this very clear, by actually bungling the date of the census by a whole ten years...there *was* a census taken when Quirinius was Prefect of all Syria, but it took place a full decade *after* Herod died. Maybe Luke was just a bad historian. It's possible, I suppose. But I wonder if Luke was simply telling the toga-wearing audience of his own day "Hey folks, this is not *a* tidy little history... it's more a story about *your own* place in history. And this is not a child's wonder story to make you smile, but rather, it's a call issued to you right now to choose to make your grown up world a bit more wonderful than it is."

You see, when Luke told the people of his day that Jesus was born at the time of Augustus' census, they would have known immediately that Augustus, the emperor of all the earth, claimed for himself a great deal of honor. He claimed for himself the title "Son of God." He was called *Soter*, in Greek, that is Savior, or Healer. They would have seen signs and

monuments making this clear all over the empire, signs declaring these exact words about Augustus Caesar and all the Caesars who followed. Son of God and Savior. Sound familiar? And Matthew's audience, upon hearing of the star and the virgin, would have immediately thought of the comet that lit up the sky before Caesar's birth. It was etched right above his head on the coins they carried in their pockets and purses. And they would have remembered that all the great emperors of the earth, from Alexander the Great to Octavian Augustus, claimed to have been born without human fathers, conceived by the will of the gods in the wombs of virginal women.

Even Luke's angelic "Good News," often rendered in English as *gospel*, was not really a religious word. It was an Imperial word placed on Roman signs and arches, which honored the birth of Caesar, whose nativity, they claimed marked the beginning of the Good News of peace on earth...a peace, they neglected to say, which was secured by oppression alone.

But the shock of the Christmas story is that these ancient titles given to the all-powerful virgin-born Emperor, "son of God", and "savior," and his promise of Good News, are now assigned to a mere peasant child. The storytellers go out of their way to make that clear. This child is not like Caesar who taxes...he is entirely *subject* to Caesar's tax instead. He is truly a nobody. This child is not like Caesar, who lives in a palace with guest rooms, but lives, like all peasants, in a one room dwelling. The family has to find privacy for the birth of their child in the far corner of the simple peasant abode where the rather aromatic family animals are kept.

Matthew's story mentions Herod, a king world-famous in that era for murdering members of his family to stay in office. Matthew contrasts his insane "family values" with that of Jesus' family, who stay together tenderly despite hardship, and easily understood suspicions on the part of Joseph that his child was born of the seed of another man.

The story, in other words, is an absolutely relentless display of contrast and comparison.

The stories in both Luke and Matthew presented the ancients, and now us, with a choice. A choice to choose between those who are known by the phrases "children of God" and "savior." They offer us a choice between distinct gospels, between two very different proclamations of Good News. Do you choose Caesar, whose rule is based not on compassion, but on slavery, imperial oppression, taxes, and corruption? Or do you choose a different way of life, a revolutionary and non-violent way of life, a life represented by a loving family caring for a helpless child in tough times? A way of life, in fact, made plain in the teachings of the man that child grew into.

After all, as an adult, didn't this guy ask people to find a way to see the humanity even in their foes? Didn't he ask them to share their goods with each other so that no one was kept from the table? And didn't he ask them to stop claiming that anyone owed them anything because of their ancestry or prestige or honors? And didn't he warn them to solve their own problems without submitting to outward authority? And to stop comparing themselves with others, either

high or low? Didn't he ask them, in fact, to think for themselves and leave all the fool slogans behind?

Jesus would one day make the Christmas message *perfectly* clear when he said "How blest are the peace makers! Those are the ones who shall be known as the children of God!" Not Caesar with his spears and shields by the million, not even himself, but any human being (like you, like me?) acting in their lives the completely unexpected and revolutionary practice of peace on earth. Anyone (like you? like me?) who lives as if good will *might be possible even in our life time*. Anyone (could it be you? could it be me?) daring to think the revolutionary philosophy that violence secures no ultimate solution, but rather, sows the seed for all future conflict. Anyone who believes that peace is not a dream for fools, but a true vision for the courageous and the daring and the alive.

The Christmas story is not about miracles, folks, or about fables or "metaphors of inward birth." It's not about a singular messiah, or Christos, that was born one fine day 2000 years ago, or about incarnation, or any of that jazz. That's all beside the point, as far as I am concerned. The Christmas story is about how we choose to live our lives... do we choose the possibility of peace, kindness, generosity and love? Or do we bow our resigned head to the fated inevitability of violence, greed and deception in the world? Do we think life is without hope, or filled to the brim with hope, so that struggle is worth it and the risk of love is one worth taking daily, and hourly? Even if we fall? Even if it's dangerous?

The Christmas story, for me, is like the present snow, which, if just for a short time, snowflake by snowflake, turns the clamor of the world into a mere whisper. The winter landscape offers me a silent peaceful foretaste of what peace and good will might mean on the earth. Quiet. Warm candles. People to cherish. Holding hands. Music as lovely as the sun setting through crystal branches. Dangerous stuff, that. Like the brush of impossible angel wings in the dark of night.

Music

Offertory

Blessing of Tables of Food and Fire

Christmas is a kindling of new fires,
a revolution of the spirit,
a transformation,
a new way of thinking.
Single lights, but shedding light together.
Single lights, equal in dignity and power,
but shedding light together.
Light that all may rejoice in.

I bless the light, the kindling of the new fire.

Christmas is a feast, a feast for everyone.
No one can be kept from the table.
No one can be kept in their state of hunger.
All are welcome. All are worthy.
There are no barriers, nothing owed, nothing earned.
The feast is for all, as the ancient teacher said,
for such bread is life, such a feast is love made plain.
I bless the feast, the feast that is for everyone.

And I bless the silence which unites us,
along with carol, music, feast and fire,
into a community of hope and dignity and power.
I bless the silence.

Silence for a Time

Christmas Candle Lighting

Circle Carol 251 Silent Night

Blessing of the Assembly

The night welcomes us, silently, silently,
and we welcome the night.
The new day begins soon. A new year.
Promise and hope are gathered in the arms of
this silent night, and pressed with kisses of love.
Joy begins to blossom in this glowing place
like a rose blooming quietly in the snow.
Praise for the gift of another Christmas.
Praise for the gift of life and love. Amen.

The Closing Act of Communion