

# **Christmas Eve Compline, 2005**

## **Nocturnes of Nativity**

### **Welcome**

### **Prelude**

### **First Nocturne: The Opening**

We are here  
resting in the arms of a dark December night,  
to open ourselves for a time  
that we might see the world, and our own lives,  
in a different light.

The light of blessing, not fear.  
The light of vision, not vanity.  
The light of community, not commotion.  
The light which is born, not made,  
which like the sparkling cosmos itself  
comes forth unexpected from a silent, silent night.

*Blest is this silent night, alive with wisdom.  
Blest is this night which gives birth to light.  
And blest are You, Love, our star, our joy,  
our journey, our beginning and our end.  
Bless this hour, which opens now in peace. Amen.*

### **Kindling the Grail**

### **Kindling the Hanukkah**

### **#234 In the Gentle of the Moon**

### **Second Nocturne**

The year ends soon.  
The year ends.  
The noise of it, surely,  
the sadness and joy of its days  
grows quieter now,  
muffled by this surprisingly temperate night.  
A finger is put to the year's trembling lips. Sh...sh...  
The stars add no word of their own.  
The candles bestow the gift of their light quietly,  
asking nothing in return.  
And the window panes reflect it back  
without even a hint of commentary.  
The darkness comforts and holds us,  
like children rocking in a welcoming lap.  
To and fro, up and down, are no more, now,  
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 silence,  
I bow in welcome. I bow in thanks.

## **Silence**

**Music: Oh Holy Night Carey McDonald**

## **Lesson from the Gospel of Luke**

In the days of Herod, the King of Judea,  
there in the hill country, Mary sang this psalm:  
*From my deepest soul I praise the Eternal,  
and my every breath rejoices in God,  
who makes me whole.  
From now on, every generation to come  
will see fit to congratulate me,  
because the source of all strength*

*has done such wonderful things for me.*

*The Holy, you see, is filled with compassion for those who are terrified in this world, generation after generation. And this is the Eternal's strength in this world, the pulling of the mighty and arrogant off their thrones, the annulling of their private schemes. And instead, the lifting up of the lowly. The hungry fed, the full sent away empty. And so now, in my very lifetime, the Eternal arrives to aid us, remembering the promises of old to Abraham and all of his children, including Israel, who now is embraced by mercy at last.*

## **Carol 241 In the Bleak Midwinter**

### **Lesson (Luke cont.)**

And it so 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. Travelers had to return to their own hometowns in order to be properly counted in the census. And so Joseph left The Galilee, Nazareth to be exact, and traveled down south to Judea, to his homestead in Bethlehem, David's legendary home. With him was Mary, his fiancée, who was due at any moment.

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 she had to use the cattle-feeder for his first crib, since they could find no better privacy in the place where they were staying.

Nearby, shepherders were keeping a night watch over their flocks. Suddenly a divine messenger came to them, as a majestic light shone around them. They were terrified!

But the messenger said to them: "Don't be afraid. For, listen, I have Good News for you today! In David's town, a child is born for you, a Healer who has been chosen 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 what appeared to be a choir in the sky, who sang “The True Glory of God Most High... is True Peace among all the people on the earth.”

Then the choir 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 Angels We Have Heard On High**

#### **Third Nocturne:**

#### **A Night Homily on the Real Christmas**

At the choir concert this last Sunday night, our choir director, Les, found the most interesting carols for our choir to sing, 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish and Catalunyan carols. And they were very sprightly numbers too, full of dance-like rhythms.

The carols utilized unusual texts however.

Instead of the traditional gold, frankincense and myrrh associated with the Christmas story, the visitors to the newborn child bring lemon leaves, bread dipped in wine, a chunk of lard, some cottage cheese, and a bit of hot chocolate.

Now I probably don’t have to tell you that the word *chocolate* occurs no place in the New Testament. Nor do the words *lemon*, or *cottage cheese*.

These foodstuffs *were*, however, the staples of the local peasants who sang these carols. They were trying to tie the story of Jesus to their own stories by adding familiar details from their own lives. They were bringing the distant close.

But this custom of making far away stories local, and exotic stories familiar, is quite typical of human culture beyond Spain as well. Pictures of Jesus in Japan reveal him as thoroughly Japanese. The African Jesus often has mahogany skin. Australian Christmas carols are filled with images of sun and heat, not snow and cold, since Christmas falls in summer there. And even here, in the United States of America, folks will routinely tell you that Jesus was born in a stable, which, if you listened carefully, the story never actually mentions. This is because our nation was originally a rural one, with stables and barns dotting the landscape. But I assure you, there were no free-standing stables in the ancient Near East. The domesticated animals always lived with the people in another part of the house. But people here in the States understandably projected their own familiar barns onto the ancient tale, and changed their picturing of it to suit their own local understanding.

Now listen, I am not making fun of this idea at all. Indeed, my intention is to work *with* it tonight, not against it.

And I intend to do this knowing that such rewriting to localize distant events has not always made people happy. For example, when the skeptical, and not terribly religious, Mexican painter Diego Rivera, back in 1930's Detroit, painted a fresco depicting the Christmas story by substituting a hospital nurse for Mary, and an inoculating doctor for Joseph, the religious rights of that era were enraged. They quickly and furiously raised a million dollars...real cash money in those days...to plaster over Rivera's magnificent fresco. Happily, Henry Ford himself, the chief sponsor of the artist, came to the rescue and refused to take their money, reminding them that an artist can paint whatever an artist wants and people don't have to like it if they don't want to.

And frankly, the anonymous author we call Luke himself had done something similar in his retelling of the story of the birth of Jesus. After all, every modern biblical scholar I know is convinced that the birth stories of Jesus, as Luke tells them, are not in the least sober history. They are clearly written to make certain theological points, and to answer questions raised in his own era, a full hundred years after the Nativity. The teacher

Jesus was undoubtedly born in the small hamlet of Nazareth into a very large Galilean family. But Luke's story remains poignant for the social commentary he weaves throughout it...the universality of poverty, the abusive power of any Empire, the anguish of truly difficult family situations, and the frustrating fate of marginalized peoples.

So, on this night of story and deep reality, here is the Christmas story again, remembering that Luke was reminding us, with considerable poetry, that human beings have the remarkable power to confront and transcend difficult situations and almost impossible realities. And they have the power to imagine the world turned topsy-turvy, as the teenager Mary expressed in her famous psalm which you heard earlier. They even have the power to imagine beyond the upside-down world to a world of universal brotherhood and sisterhood, with the gifts of this earthly life denied to no one. In short, we human beings can imagine for ourselves, all of us, the very ideas preached by Jesus when he grew up and became an adult.

Not long ago, a fifteen-year-old named Mariah was reading a book someone had left on a table at the Main Library downtown. It was a book by a woman named Maya Angelou. "A Brave and Startling Truth" flowed across the title page. Mariah found the title odd and yet it called to her in some strange way. So she opened the book and started to read. She was happy that she could read the poem, despite her difficulties with reading in general. It wasn't a long book, so once she finished it, she read it again. And then again. She was amazed about how good the wonderful words made her feel as she sat there in the warm library.

Later, as she walked home from the library, she discovered that she must've learned some of the lines by heart. It seemed that way at least, because as she was walking, some of the words she had read came to her lips quite easily.

*"We the people, on this small and drifting planet, have hands which can strike, sapping life from the living. But we also have hands that can touch with healing, and with such tenderness, that the haughty neck bows, and*

*the proud back bends, and the rifles will fall from our shoulders, and the land mines will have been removed.”*

These words made Mariah think of her grandfather, who had died in that war over in Vietnam. A landmine killed him. And the words brought to mind her smiling brother William, who had almost been killed in that nasty gang fight on the corner of Bryden and Ohio. She remembered how the doctors in their long white coats over at Grant had literally brought him back to life, how their hands moved over him in the emergency room like the hands of angels, soothing his pain, repairing his wounds.

Soon Mariah had walked almost a half a mile south of downtown on High St. It was such a balmy December afternoon she decided to walk instead of take the COTA bus. But soon she began to remember just how long that walk was going to be. She thought of her brother William again, too, remembering how she both loved it and hated it when he would tease her about her name while he was recovering in the hospital. He would sing that silly old song: “They called the wind Mariah...woosh, woosh, woosh!”

As she saw William’s face in her mind’s eye, she found herself patting her growing belly. If it is a boy, maybe she would name it after her brother. If it was a girl...well, she wasn’t sure.

Then, as so often happened with Mariah, she moved from pleasant thoughts to deep worry. Her boyfriend Joey was still working out of state framing homes in some city up in Michigan she and he could never afford to live in. He’d been there already 5 months. She knew it was the way it had to be. “Once he gets insurance coverage from the company,” she would tell herself, “he will marry me and bring me up to Michigan. I’ll be covered then under his plan. But I wonder,” she thought, “what if that doesn’t happen by the time the baby arrives? It’s due next month already. And what will he say when he finds out this is probably not his child anyway? I wonder, would he ever figure it out if I didn’t tell him?”

Mariah had been working for Big Bear when they closed their stores, but that was some time ago. And she had found work... for minimum wage at that Wendy's on Broad St... but she found out fast enough that this only worked if she stayed on the couch at her sister Trisha's place. And Trisha was getting married and moving out of state with her new husband come February.

Mariah suddenly noticed that the sunset sky was a perfect orange. "How beautiful!" she said aloud. And already she could see a bright star near the moon, a very bright star she had never noticed before. "I bet William would say to me 'That ain't no star. That's the planet Venus.'" As the sky grew darker, Mariah noticed that the moon looked just like one of those gold hoop earrings she once saw at that counter in Lazarus.

Suddenly she felt a sharp thrust inside her. Oh no! OH NO! Was the baby coming? Early? Here? Now? On High St. in south Columbus? It can't be! Mariah thought fearfully.

The pain went away as suddenly as it arrived. She was relieved. Mariah started to dump on herself. "I am doing way too much walking for a pregnant girl, even if it is warm outside." Suddenly, another spasm of pain. "I'll never make it home!" she said to herself in a panic. She called her sister Trisha on her cell phone. But her sister did not pick up.

Mariah remembered she must not be far from that old hospital they closed on South High. "Can't be more than a block or so away," she thought. She knew it wasn't a hospital anymore, but she seemed to remember they had some doctors' offices there. She looked ahead... "Are those the clinic lights?" she wondered. They are brighter than that big star, those lights. So inviting. So hopeful.

It's the last thing she remembered from High St. When she woke up, she was in some sort of bed, maybe in a hospital. Or some clinic. "Maybe that new neighborhood clinic which just opened on Main St.," she imagined. She could not remember how she got here if that's where she was. She suddenly noticed she was surrounded by women and men in white coats.



Like angels, she remembered, thinking of her brother. She thought she saw her sister Trisha's face, and then the pain came again.

The next thing she remembered was the cry of a newborn child. A sharp cry, sucking in air. "He's whole," one of the nurses said. "I was worried, the way he was coming out. And for being so early, he's pretty big." Her child?

She felt someone grab her hand. Was it her sister Trisha? And who was that with her? Clyde! "It must be Clyde," she thought. "Who let you in here?" she whispered, smiling through her continuing pain. Mariah thinks he's the father, but in fact, she is really not sure. "God, what a life!" she said to no one particular.

Suddenly she thought, "Where is my baby? And who is going to pay for this? I don't have any insurance. Joey is still in Michigan!" But as she said this, she caught sight of the bright planet near the gold-earring moon just outside the window.

All of a sudden, Mariah felt a sense of peace. The pain had passed. She knew she couldn't know in advance how she was going to do it, but she said aloud to no one in particular, "I am going to do it." She decided then and there to raise the child, no matter what. "Trisha, call Joey. I'm gonna tell him the truth and let the chips fall where they may. But I am gonna call him." Mariah knew she wasn't about to call anyone, but realized that something had changed in her.

She had a new will to live in the world with its Vietnams and gang fights. She felt she was going to find some way to turn that world around, so she could bring her son safe through it all. Deep in her heart an image formed...her son, all grown up and one of these people in their white lab coats, healing people, bringing them hope like that star outside her window. She saw her son tall and strong, a healer, helping poor people like herself find their way in the midst of a difficult world.

And content in that thought, she suddenly, in the midst of her delirium, felt her baby being lowered into her arms, all wrapped up tight in some soft white blanket. And tears that can only be joy began to run down her cheek as she caught her first scent of this, her firstborn child. And Mariah realized right then that she had never known such happiness in all her life.

### **Music: Quartet**

### **Offertory**

Christmas and Hanukkah have been seasons of gift-giving for many, many generations. In ancient times, the Solstice celebrations of the Unconquered Sun and Saturnalia were also times of gift-giving, times of generosity. In that spirit, we set aside this time of offering.

### **Fourth Nocturne: Communion**

There are no stars, save that they are a part of the cosmos.  
I am not an individual, save that I am part of community,  
and in relationship to others. The universe is woven of atoms and emptiness, I hear, but all I can see for sure are the relationships, between star and star, between heart and heart, between life and life, between our era and eras past and to come.

I do not own myself any more than I can own the stars, or wrap the night around me as my own personal garment. I can only share myself, in relationship. For the gravity of love is great, and only Love can give birth to what is real. And all real things are part of a great communion which, like the silence which also nourishes our spirit, needs no consecration more than sharing.

### **Silence for a Time**

### **Music**

## **Blessing of the Bread and Fire**

I say 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.

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

## **Candle Lighting**

**244 It Came Upon**

**255 There's A Star In the East**

**256 Winter Night**

**Circle Carol**

**Fifth Nocturne**

May peace within the real world  
proclaimed on this holy night  
Continue in our lives as we move toward the  
new year. Let it radiate out from our lives  
like light from a thousand candles, or a thousand stars. This being so, I  
dare to allow myself to dream of peace, to dream of peace, to dream of  
peace. Blest is this night.  
Amen.