

December 24, 2007

Welcome Su Ann Farnlacher

Prelude J.S. Bach Oratio Lea Pearson and Carey MacDonald

Opening Words (all rise)

We are here

to sing carols under the stars of night

and to hear once again the ancient stories

that speak, across the ages each year,

of the glory of peace on earth.

**And blest all the more is the stubborn imagination which insists that
tomorrow's peace might begin today.**

Blest is good will toward all. Amen.

Carol:#224 Let Christmas Come

Sequence: Nocturne for Christmas Eve

The stars shine in the deep darkness
on Christmas Eve.

They shine for everyone. And everything.

They pose no questions.

They do not ask permission.

They shine steady and clear.

Even when the clouds obscure them.

The stars are silent

as they shine in the deep
darkness of Christmas Eve.

They shine upon the woman,

in this country or some other,

who is too poor to eat, and also pregnant.

They shine upon the CEO who makes
ten-thousand dollars a minute.

They shine upon those who eat late Christmas Eve suppers surrounded by
family, come home from far away.

They shine upon those who no long
are connected by heart to their family,
and would rather celebrate Christmas alone.

They shine upon those who do not, and
cannot, tolerate Christmas with any ease,
and who shelter themselves from the glare
of the day in the safety of a Chinese restaurant.

The stars shine silently upon both sides of those who are at war.

They shine without scolding,
for their work is only to illumine,
not force.

They shine in perfect silence in the night.
Blest is the silence of the stars, which signs the Silence at the heart of all things,
the Silence which, like the stars,
illuminates everything.

silence for a time

Music: Pastorale

Readings:

The First Reading this evening is from Luke's gospel, written some sixty years after the death of Jesus, probably in Antioch.

The Emperor Augustus issued a decree calling for a census of the whole inhabited world. This was the first census, actually, the one which the Syrian governor, Quirinius, organized in the East.

So a man named Joseph, who had been working in the Galilee, traveled south with Mary, his fiancée, to Bethlehem, which was where his family home was located. Mary was due to give birth any day. And indeed, it was while they were in Bethlehem that Mary gave birth to her first-born child. But because Joseph's home was crowded, they took their newborn to the part of the house where the animals were sleeping, and used their feeding trough as his first crib. In that manger they laid him, wrapping him up tight according to custom.

Nearby some young sheep-herders were keeping a night-watch on their flocks. Suddenly a messenger from God appeared to them, and a bright light blazed around them, and they were all scared to death.

But the messenger comforted them with these words: "Don't be scared. I bring good news! I bring you joy! For today in the village a child has been born, who is the chosen one of God, a healer. This is how you will distinguish him. Like every newborn he is wrapped up tight, but he alone has a cattle-feeder for his cradle."

Suddenly, the messenger was joined by a whole chorus of angels, singing praises.

"The glory of God is this:
peace among the people,
and goodwill toward all."

The Second Reading is from the writings of the late Dorothee Sölle, often called the "conscience of the Christian church." She was a professor of theology and philosophy at the University of Köln.

In this night
the stars left their habitual places
and kindled wildfire tidings that spread faster than sound.

In this night, the shepherds left their posts

to shout the new slogans
into each other's clogged ears.

In this night, the foxes left their warm burrows
and the lion spoke with deliberation,
“This is the end revolution.”

In this night
roses fooled the earth
and began to bloom in the snow.

Carol 231 Angels We Have Heard On High

The Third Reading is a different version of the birth story of Jesus, this time told from the vantage of the gospel of Matthew, written at about the same time as Luke's gospel, but in a different part of the empire.

Now after Jesus had been born in Bethlehem of Judea, back during the reign of King Herod, a party of Persian astrologers, called Magi, suddenly arrived at Jerusalem, asking: “Where can we find the newborn Ruler 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 was still alive and still ruling. 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 prophets: ‘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, Israel.’”

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 simply as a morning star, was now south of 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, and 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.

The Fourth Reading is from Boris Pasternak, who wrote this poem in 1956, pretending that it was a poem written by his poetic character Dr. Zhivago in the novel by the same name. This is a portion of a very long poem indeed.

Winter? Here to stay.
The infant was cold in the cave
cut from the slope
with wind blowing in
from the open plain.

And in the distance: snowy fields;
the village graveyard with fences, tombstones, cart-shafts
left in the drifted snow.
And the sky above the cemetery?
Full of stars!

Among them, unnoticed until then,
like a tiny candle stub,
a tentative homing beacon,
a star.
It shimmered
on the road into Bethlehem at first,

and then, burst into flame, like a farm
on fire! Like a hay-stack set ablaze by a
spark of arson!

It flared up, an inferno
in the hayfield of heaven
bursting open in the center
of the whole universe, now
alarmed by this new star.
The star glowed red all around.

In the gray and ashen pre-dawn gloom,
drivers and herdsmen stamped their feet,
riders and pedestrians cursed
each other out, and at the drinking trough
of dug-out log, donkeys kicked,
camels snorted.

Daylight came. Dawn swept away the last
of stars from the sky, like dust of ashes,
and only the magi, did Mary admit
through the gate.

#238 Within the Shining of A Star

Homily For Christmas Eve

I remember my response when a great and respected Christian biblical scholar first suggested to me that the Christmas Story probably didn't have much historical validity to it.

"Oh, don't get me wrong," he said. "King Herod existed, and from what we know from other historical sources was undeniably a pretty rotten fellow, for the most part. Lots of evidence for that. And the Emperor Augustus too...we know a lot about him from other sources, and he wasn't all that wonderful either. And of course, there was an historical Jew, a Galilean named Yeshu, or as we say in a garbled version of Greek, Jesus, who indeed lived back in the days of Herod and Augustus. He seems to have been someone who told truly memorable stories, and who was finally done in by the occupying force in the land. His mother was probably named Mary too...good chance of that, indeed. After all, we know from archeological evidence that more than one quarter of all the women who lived in the Galilee at that time were named that. One out of four. Those are pretty good odds, no?"

"But as for this star business, and the manger and the shepherds and the Magi...and even the town of his birth, Bethlehem, that's all...well...not terribly historical. Truth is, we don't know when or where Jesus was born, although most historians bet on some village in the Galilee, probably Nazareth. But we don't know the time of the year, the day or the place, and frankly, I doubt we ever will. Or that we even can."

The professor...a Franciscan priest of great intellect...smiled, apparently quite pleased with himself. I, however, got all agitated inside.

Now listen.

I'm not one to give much credence to the literal understandings of miracles, and, for most of my life, I've been happy to think of Jesus as an ethical teacher and philosopher that not too many people (unfortunately) pay attention to anymore. I certainly haven't thought for some time that he was a fit subject for theological speculation. And I revere the courage of our ancestors who were imprisoned, or killed, by the powers of the world, because they wanted to practice the compassionate religion *of* Jesus rather than turn the person of Jesus into an uncompassionate religious figure of threat and judgment. But the fact that so much of the Nativity story had a legendary character really upset me for some reason. I wanted at least some of it to be true.

The professor noted my alarm, which must have been as clear as a shadow on my face. So he said: "Mark, look, knowing what I know doesn't interfere with Christmas Eve for me one bit. And anyway, as you know, for almost four hundred years after Jesus, no one celebrated Christmas anywhere in the world, even though they knew the exact same stories we have. They taught that his teachings were important, and his final days, not the what-and-wherefors of his birth. I mean, let me put it this way, does anyone ever ask you what hospital sheltered your mother as she gave birth to you *before* they listen to

what you have to say? And anyway, Mark, for those same 400 years when there was no Christmas, no one took these stories literally as history in the first place. The early Christians always used to say: “It’s the spiritual meaning of the scripture which is important, the ethical, and moral import which touches the heart, not the specific historical details.”

“Nice history lesson,” I thought. But I was still troubled. Then the professor added: “Think of the Christmas story as a parable told about Jesus, just as later, he would tell parables to engage his friends. You never ask the name and address of the prodigal son, do you? You don’t ask any particulars about that Good Samaritan guy, do you? You don’t ask the precise measurement of yeast that went into the bread which that woman in the parable was baking, do you? Yet those stories are so famous, and so meaningful, that they have become bywords in English without most people even knowing they’re stories from the lips of Jesus.”

“Ah,” I said, “now I get it!”

And I really did. *That business of the nativity story being a parable* made sense to me.

And from that day on, I relaxed more about this night of wonderful tales conveniently attached to the days of the Winter Solstice.

Recently, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg came out with a book saying the same thing. The Christmas Story, they said, is one of the great western parables that serves in every generation to question the culture in which we live. And which invites all those who hear the story each year to question themselves.

That’s, after all, what a parable is. Not an allegory. Not a symbolic story with a solution. But a story with a question in it.

Whom do you identify with in the story?
Which character grabs you in the story?

Joseph Brodsky, the great Russian poet, surmised this a long time ago when he wrote the line you find at the top of your orders of celebration: *V Rozhdyestva vsyaw nyemogo volkhvuy*. “When it’s Christmas, we’re all of us Magi.”

That was how he saw it, anyway. I have to imagine he was speaking of his own life, his own search for what is holy and precious.

But how about you? Are *you* looking for something in your life? Or someone? Do you think it’s all in the stars, that finding what you are looking for is somehow inevitable? Then Brodsky may have gotten it right for you, too. You may be one of the modern Magi, looking for something great and bright even amidst the tawdry barn-straw of the present age. You may, like them, not know what it is, and when you find it, you may, like them, be surprised by how ordinary greatness looks. But maybe you’re a Magus, one of the Magi.

Or maybe you identify with Mary, who gives birth, even though it doesn't seem very likely that any person without deep sexual intimacy might give birth. But I think of this man I know named Kelly. Five years ago it was unlikely, I thought, that he would still be living. He was more than poor, out of work, unable to read at all because of world-class dyslexia issues, and I mean it, *he couldn't read at all*. He was hooked on drugs and drink, and he sold himself on the street to pay his rent.

A number of us who knew him when he had been working as a cashier at a local store began to suggest other ways to be in the world, other ways to make it rather than the way he was doing it. We made suggestions. We stood by him as he struggled. We helped him look for work. We cared for him, brought him food when he had none. Most importantly, we saw him for who he could be, rather than what he was.

Today, five years later Kelly is off drugs. Off drink. Off the streets. He is getting by...just barely...but he is getting by. And he is improving his reading skills. He did not go through AA or some program. He did not go through NA. He simply did it on his own. By taking the faith we had in him and aiming at his own heart.

Now it's not likely to get off drugs or drink without the intimate help of AA or other programs. Not likely at all. Almost as unlikely as a virginal conception. But Kelly did it. In fact, it's quite similar to the story we just heard: a poor young mother in the story clearly has a bad reputation in the community, but nevertheless, gives birth to beloved new life. So did Kelly. It went against the odds. But the birth of new life in both cases is real.

Or maybe you identify with the shepherds.

You feel outside of things. Far away from the warm holiday homes, out in the cold. You are alone in the dark, outside, and all you can see are the orange windows of the cottages with people inside them feasting and toasting and expressing love. Without you. Maybe you feel alone, left out. A bit down about all this festivity. But you are still a deep person, with the song of peace and good will inside of you. Like Dorothee Soelle's shepherds, you want to shout that "new slogan" of "peace on earth, and good will" to everyone who thinks you're not very clever or witty. *In this night*, she wrote, *the shepherds left their posts to shout the new slogans into each other's clogged ears*.

Or maybe it's the star you identify with. You don't have to identify with a person in a parable. Seeing your similarities to an important object in a story is OK too. Let's get one thing clear right from the get-go. The star that Pasternak writes about in his poem is not some astronomical conjunction or a supernova like they are likely to suggest down at the planetarium. The star is not some astrophysical fact, or gathering of wayward planets. The astronomers back then were not ignorant fools you know. They knew the difference between stars and planets, comets and conjunctions.

No, this star is a metaphorical star, as Pasternak clearly knew. It shines with a radical light! It flashes, burns like a "fire on the farm," says Pasternak, burns like "a haystack set ablaze by an arson!"

The impatient visionary or revolutionary of our own benighted age imagines a spiritual fire sweeping through the aisles of power and might with its cleansing flame. They know

there are versions of Rome's corrupt Emperor, Augustus, living right now; Augustus, that egoist who referred to himself as *son of God* and *savior of the world*. There are also modern versions of Judea's King Herod, Herod who ruthlessly wiped out untold many because of his paranoia. Those who identify with the blazing, insistent angry-red star are those who are tired of their hope flagging, their vision fading, in the warring and consumerist culture of our age. They are looking for fire, not despair.

Or are you, maybe, Joseph, reliable and understanding, the very strength in the story, but at the edge of things? Who are you in the story?

The Christmas story may not be history in the sober, list-of-provable facts way, but it's a story so true in its reliability and truthfulness about who we are, that some of our ancestors, fifteen hundred years ago, were bold enough to attach these amazing parables of question and challenge to the very center of the year, the solstice, "when the days are short, and nights are long."

Let Christmas come! We sang earlier. Its great star glow! Its table gleam! The truth of dream! Indeed, once I let the stories do for me what only stories can do, let it be so.

Carol #249

Offertory

Let an offering now be received of the gifts folks have brought to this night of beauty and memory and vision and peace.

Blessing of the Bread and Light

And so now I bless both bread and light.

I bless the bread; it is the sign and symbol of the daily practice of the real person whose legendary birth we celebrate tonight. Opening his table to all people, no matter their gender, their station in life, their education, their status, their beliefs, their ability, he reminded us that no one can be left out of the embrace of love, for love to be love. He reminded us that peace is not peace when it is built on uniformity. But peace is truly peace when diversity is taken seriously, and those who are different share bread together and embrace under the stars.

And I bless the light of the fire, which reminds us that whatever star we follow, it's got to be the kind that can illumine us here on earth, as close as a candle on Christmas Eve. Let fire and bread, therefore, both be signs of this community which seeks a vision of justice, and wants to kindle the fire of its coming. For as the ancient teacher said: "I've come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish I could see the fire already kindled now!" Amen.

Music

Christmas Candlelighting

Silence

Silent Night

Blessing

Now let us leave the silence of this night and the beauty of these lights
into the lengthening days to come,
where some of us will seek, some, give birth to, the unexpected, and others will
renew their sacred vision of a world made just, with power shared at last.
Go in peace, enriched by this night.
Amen

Communion