

# **Christmas Evensong**

## **December 24, 2011**

### **Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini**

#### **Opening Words:**

We are here

*to kindle candles, and kindle our lives*

just before the quietest midnight of the year.

*The stories we tell tonight are from long ago,*

and our lives are here, now, in a different world.

*And new hope and the joys of peace still call us*

as much as when stars were brighter in the sky.

*So now,*

**let the gates of the imagination open onto the starlit landscape of peace, and let our hopes turn to song, and songs into joy. Blest are you, Love, our call and our path.**

#### **#236 O Thou Joyful Day**

##### **Nocturne**

The stars Alpheraz, Deneb and Regulus  
shine over folks who look forward to Christmas  
with skipping joy,  
and also over folks who dread its coming for  
a thousand unexpressed reasons.

The stars, however, don't give a care where their light goes...  
they just do what they do: they shine silently on everyone.

The stars Procyon, Betelgeuse and Sirius  
shine over those lighting Menorahs before their children this evening  
and those who are dining at candlelit tables  
near festive trees with visiting family and friends.

The stars, however, never care about where their light goes...  
they just do what they do: they shine silently on everyone.

The stars Arcturus, Antares and Pollux shine over those whose hearts cloud up during the gray  
days of winter, and on those whose hearts soar high as they imagine ice skating or tobogganing.

The stars, however, never care about where their light goes...  
they just do what they do: they shine silently on everyone.

O Stars, without name or with several names,  
you shine down on Columbus tonight, and faintly silver the rooftops. Born of the same dust from  
which you were born, we follow your example, no matter our beliefs or doubts or unbeliefs, no  
matter our personal stories, memories of Christmases past,  
or concerns about getting through the maze of the holidays, and no matter what languages we  
speak or sign. We do what you do, and simply keep a beautiful nocturne of silence.

**The First Reading** for Christmas Eve *is from the ancient Gospel, or Good News Book, of Loukas, whom we call Luke in English. The author writes in better Greek than the other Gospel writers. It was written around 90 or so, and thus almost a hundred years after the era he is describing. We think it was written in Ephesus. Luke is the traditional name for the author, dating from the mid-second century, so we cannot know for sure who the author is. The translations are new, and are intended to get you to hear what those who first heard these stories in Greek would have understood.*

Long ago, the exalted Caesar issued a proclamation saying that the entire inhabited world was to undergo a census, for taxing purposes. (This was the first census, mind you, and it took place when Quirinius was governor up in Syria.) People everywhere went to their hometowns to comply with the proclamation and to fill out the forms. So Joseph, whose lineage stemmed from famous King David himself, was born and raised in Judea, so left Nazaret up in the Galilee where he had been living, and traveled south to David's old hamlet, called Bethlehem. He had traveled there with Mary, his fiancée, who was visibly close to term. In fact, it was while they were there that she delivered her firstborn son. His first crib was a cattle-feeder where the animals were kept, since of course there was no real privacy for them in the other part of the house.

Nearby were fields, where shepherders camped out to keep a watch on their herds in the dark night. Without warning, a divine messenger appeared in a blaze of light, and brightness surrounded them. They were terrified by this vision. But the voice of the messenger comforted them, saying: "There is nothing to be afraid of. We are only offering you some good news. Joyful news for one and all! In David's hamlet over there a healer has been born, who will be anointed to bring wholeness to the broken. Here's what to look for. You will find an ordinary baby, a baby who, as usual, is bound up in protective strips of linen. And, as is often the case, sleeping in a bed of hay in a cattlefeeder."

Then a whole division appeared in the sky next to the messenger. They were singing like a choir. Here is what they sang: "The true glory of God is when people on earth live in peace with each other."

### **Carol 231 Angels We Have Heard**

*The Second Reading is from the Good News Book of Matthew. This name has been attached to this text since the second century, but the author is completely unknown to us. It's clear however from internal evidence, that the book was written around the year 85 in the village culture of Upper Galilee or even southern Syria. Matthew tells a distinctly different story than Luke.*

Long ago, when Jesus was born in the days when Herod ruled, a revered party of Persian astrologers arrived in Jerusalem from the East, asking about the town: "Where can we find the newborn Prince who will one day rule in this land? We have calculated that it must be *his* star that rises up before the sun every dawn, and so now we have come to offer him due honor."

When Herod got wind of this, he was deeply aggravated. So he called a council of all the scholars and experts on the subject, and asked them what their question could possibly mean. Would someone anoint someone other than his own son to rule?"

"The prophetic texts point this out," they said, after they had consulted with each other: "Bethlehem will be the birthplace of the next prince, an anointed shepherd who will serve the whole nation."

So, having heard this, Herod summoned the astrologers and interviewed them quite secretly, and questioned them about their observations, such as when they had seen this star for the very first time. After he got the answers he wanted, he sent them to Bethlehem, a morning's walk from Jerusalem. Before they left, he whispered to them: "When you find him, send me news of his whereabouts at once. I should go and pay him honor myself, no?" So they left at dawn, the star now moving south, leading them to the village. When they entered the village, the star suddenly appeared to stand still over the house where the newborn prince was, bright enough to be seen in the daylight. So they entered the house, and they saw the mother, Mary, with her babe, and were overjoyed at the sight. They lay at her feet gifts honoring her child's future: some valuable gold, some rare frankincense, and some balm made from healing myrrh. Warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they left for Persia by an entirely different route.

### **Carol 238 Within the Shining of Star**

*The Third Reading is taken from the 2011 reflection called Christmas Eve by my friend Kaki McTigue, senior minister at our congregation in New Haven.*

All these centuries after the story of the star, the baby, and the angels singing him in with their mysterious alleluias, we are wandering still. We stumble over our need, or our fear. Bethlehem is not a gentle city tonight. It's people are wise in the ways of the clenched fist, the broken truce. Marked like them with scars of ignorance or sorrow, we come to Christmas baffled as any shepherd by the music that sounds so high above us, the syntax foreign to our skeptical hearts.

Yet we remember that the heart of Christmas is hope: hope that a child, born homeless and in danger, may grow up to be wise and kind. New hope in ourselves rises then too, that we will learn one day how to bring peace to this earth, how to sing *for ourselves* the angels' songs of joy.

### **Carol #256**

**The fourth reading** for Christmas Eve comes from the pen of therapist Thomas Moore, from an article he wrote in 1986 for *Tikkun*, an excellent Jewish social awareness magazine.

Understand that nativity happens in *you*, in *your* family, and in *your* community, or, it happens only for show. Unless you *are* Christmas, then this festival is only a story to tell, and not **a myth to live**. This year, we can remember the good people on all sides who have died and have been hurt in war and conflict. We could allow the new light to take up residence in us, and so radically that we couldn't *tolerate* the thought of bloodshed for puny political purposes and insane fantasies of ownership and belonging. You don't have to be a genius to understand that there is

another way, that peace is imaginable. But it will only happen if the new life represented by the Christmas crèche is lodged deep within our thoughts and feelings.

## Homily

Unless you *are* Christmas, Thomas Moore says to us, then this festival is only a story to tell and not a myth to live. Those words hit me powerfully when I first read them. *A myth to live?* Unless we *are* Christmas? What do those words mean?

Ten years ago I was lucky enough to visit modern Bethlehem. It's not a very beautiful city, to my eyes, nor did all the formidable rifles slung over shoulders everywhere I looked make me think much of Peace on Earth and Goodwill.

You enter the church of the Nativity through a door you have to duck to get through. It's more like a window. The door had been larger once, a beautiful stone arch, but folks used to ride carts into the place and steal anything not nailed down, so the custodians of the shrine made it difficult to get in. The building itself is very old, and looks it. The wooden ceiling has visible cracks in it, the floor is worn down terribly, and the columns are beginning to bend. There are no seats or pews...sitting through services is only a North American contribution to religious practice.

Your guide will take you downstairs and then show you the *exact spot* where Jesus was born. Like later, the same guide told us exactly where Jesus said this or that. It's all nonsense, of course.

Thing is, the early churches had no interest in such Christmas, or where Jesus was born, or where he said what. They didn't celebrate this night in any way, and didn't think the stories were anywhere near as important as the Sermon on the Mount.

A guy named Justin Martyr in the third century was the first to suggest that a cave in Bethlehem was the site of Jesus' birth, but even he didn't lower himself to put an x on the exact spot where Jesus laid his little head. But not too long later, people did sink that low, charging credulous pilgrims plenty to see the exact spot. Christmas itself wasn't routinely celebrated till 300 years after Justin Martyr, and it was originally celebrated on the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> of January, the dates the Eastern Orthodox still celebrate it. Roman Christians, however, linked Christmas with the beloved winter festival of Saturnalia, and thus, December 25<sup>th</sup> became Christmas and December 24<sup>th</sup> became Christmas Eve. So it has been ever since.

The exact spot they show you at the Church of Nativity is depicted at the top of your orders. There is a marble semi-circle set into a stone niche in the ancient cave Justin Martyr found. In the marble shelf is a hole the size of an ordinary supper plate. Around it is a silver star with all kinds of designs on it.

The various Christian churches, you see, who all share this spot don't much like sharing it, despite everything Jesus taught later in life. The Romans, the Greek Orthodox, the Armenians, the Russian Tsar, the French, the English all fought tooth and nail about this site for centuries. Eventually, in the mid-nineteenth century, someone *stole* the ornamental silver star, and when

the loss was discovered, the result was what historians now call the Crimean War. Tens of thousands died in battle because of this strange thing, a silver star placed by the French over a place which no modern scholar I respect thinks is any place close to where Jesus was actually born. Most suggest he was born up in the Galilee someplace, either in Nazareth, or another less famous Bethlehem which is found in the hills there. Or perhaps up near the lake.

Fighting over a holy site even if it could be proved makes no sense. It seems to me that none of the people who were killing each other in the Crimean War had taken Christmas within themselves, in Moore's words. Killing and war hardly seem like the best way to exemplify the babe who grew up to radically preach as an adult "Love your enemies." The Gospel of Luke tells us that heavenly messengers...angels is the Greek word...sang something like this: "The true glory of God is when people on earth live in peace with each other." The Crimean War must have drained God of plenty of glory, not to mention the drain that followed the Civil War here in the States, the various World Wars, and all the rest that have echoed through all of our lives, including the recent years.

I've never fought in a violent war per se, but I've known and loved plenty who have. The war in Iraq is "over" they say (although without much fanfare, I have to say), but after dozens of conversations with veterans of *many* wars, I can't really take that literally. War gets inside you, and doesn't let go for a good long time. My 95-year-old friend and colleague Farley saw his best friend from childhood hit the dust as they were both climbing the hill at Iwo Jima, and many decades later, his tears still spill and his anger still lodges in his heart. I don't see any reason why that should be a surprise.

Thomas Moore reminded us of this reality as the Iraq war ends: *This year, he says, we can remember the good people on all sides who have died and have been hurt in war and conflict. We could allow the new light to take up residence in us so radically that we couldn't tolerate the thought of bloodshed for puny political purposes and insane fantasies of ownership and belonging. You don't have to be a genius to understand that there is another way...*

He describes this whole attitude as ***letting Christmas lodge inside us***, which means beginning to let honest hope, a vision for real peace, and a sense of new life begin to displace any distorting anger, resentment and fear within us. Christmas is a powerful myth, he's saying. It's not merely a sweet solstice-time story from tradition. Unitarian writers like Longfellow and Hamilton Sears knew very well what Moore is getting at way back in the Nineteenth Century. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote his famous Christmas carol *I heard the Bells on Christmas Day* after his son was shot during the Civil War, suffering severe spinal damage. And Unitarian minister Sears wrote the words to *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* as his response to the Mexican-American war which had also just ended.

Longfellow's and Sears' carols are hardly unique takes on the deep meaning of Christmas. Remember, I began my homily by telling you that Moore really grabbed me when he says that Christmas isn't just a story, but a *myth to be lived*, to be taken within as a salve, something that has to lodge deeper inside us than fear or ignorance or, in Kaki's beautiful phrase, the perverse and up-side-down "wisdom of the clenched fist."

A myth. Disturbing words to some folks. Sometimes people get upset when they find out that the details in the famous Christmas stories are not actually historical in the ordinary meaning of that term. They chafe against it. They say to me, “Why celebrate something that isn’t literally true?”

I struggled with that question for years. The fact that the gospel writers seemed to have crafted details for differing reasons really bugged me. Caesar was a real man, Bethlehem still a real city, Quirinius was a real Syrian governor...even the names of the mother and child, Maryam and Yeshu are historical enough. But the fabricated census, the moving star, the astrologers, the angels singing about peace...lovely, but why not tell it as it actually was? What's wrong with that?

Why not say this teenager named Mary and a teenaged builder named Joseph fell in love, got married, and voila, a beautiful baby. Isn't that wondrous enough? But my professors, many of whom were devout Christians, made a perfect case for the Christmas stories all being legendary. It didn't bother them one bit.

But over time, and after years of spiritual struggle, I realized that my attitude had been hijacked by the loud voices in our culture who assure us that if our inherited cultural scripture isn't literally true word for word, then none of it's true. I wasn't even taught such dangerous either/or things when I was younger, in the church of my youth, but somehow, it seeped in and distorted my spiritual life.

Now I am absolutely glad that Luke and Matthew did what they did...and am convinced frankly that they knew what they were doing. Luke and all of his Greek speaking readers knew very well that Roman censuses were not conducted in the whacky way Luke describes, where everyone had to return to their ancestral home. The bureaucratic nightmare of such an idea would have struck folks as hilarious...and a guarantee that this story was not to be argued about as history. He tells the story of a completely ordinary child born into an exaggerated world, crazy with bureaucracy, domination, control and oppression; and he says that even though this child is ordinary, there is hope. Ordinary. Every baby was swaddled in those days in linen strips moistened with oil. Many babies were placed in straw to keep them from rolling around, and every house had straw inside the house, not tucked away in some cave. Luke's hearers would have known what he was saying to them: nothing extraordinary. He was just like us...but he will grow up to bring healing to the world, and live his life peacefully, and thus, since we are ordinary, we can do that too. He is telling the warmongers that peace is a better way, and we can walk that way, step by step, giving up our so-called realism and living with hope, that is, the new life of Christmas, inside us. He is telling us that real communication between real people is better than any cold machinery of bureaucracy Rome could come up with. “Why put your case before a judge working for a system which doesn't even know you or care for you?” this baby would ask of the peasants around him when he grew up. “Settle your disputes with each other directly. Be grown up about it.”

No matter how bad you think it is, in the world, in your life, he is saying, you can still do something about it by changing your attitude. You don't *need* armies, swords, hierarchies, bureaucracies or the self-anointed telling you that you are wrong and they are right. Every baby, he is saying to first century ears who would have understood him in that way, is already anointed

as special by power---Love, Truth--- far greater than mere emperors or kings. And Matthew knew that kings like Herod will be jealous of the power of the so-called 99 percent, and will even send his soldiers to kill everything innocent. Herod's power, in Moore's elegant words, was all caught up in "puny political purposes and insane fantasies of ownership and belonging." But power doesn't make someone good. Good, however, can make someone both powerful...and peaceful. We can actually live our lives as evidence of the glory of the Ultimate, whatever name you want to use for that, if you use any at all.

And Matthew's star. Not a conjunction of planets, a supernova, or anything the literalists try to figure out. Special stars blossomed in the sky over every hero and emperor in those most astrological days. It's a way for Matthew to say, "Once upon a time..." Except he describes an ordinary baby in an ordinary house in an ordinary backwater small town. And he says, it's this peasant who will redefine the meaning of real power in the world one day, not kings like Herod. For Matthew, the very heavens themselves know and declare the simple truth my friend Kaki wrote about in more modern language. We remember, she says, that the heart of Christmas is hope: hope that a child, born homeless and in danger, may grow up to be wise and kind. New hope in ourselves rises then too, that we *ourselves* will learn one day how to bring peace to this earth, how to sing for ourselves the angels' songs of wonder and joy.

Hope for peace on earth. Not a story to prove to skeptical minds, but, in Moore's words, a myth to be lived. The myth of Christmas can be taken inside us; in fact, no less than nourishing bread...Bethlehem after all is only the Hebrew word for Bakery.

I used to resent Christmas, but over the years, its mythos has really started to ground me in a more mature spiritual understanding than I had allowed myself for years. Right now, I couldn't be happier that it's Christmas Eve, and that I can consume its depth as bread, welcome its power as light, and live out its promised new life as a mythic story linked by memory and hope to the more historic births of everyone now alive on earth.

## **Offering**

*The offering tonight will go to the Ministers' Discretionary Fund which we use anonymously to help those suffering hardship; or, if you put it on your check memo, it will go to the Holiday Appeal.*

## **Blessing of the Feast and the Flame**

*The open table is a sign that no one may be kept away from the nourishment they need. As said the man whose mythic birth is celebrated tonight: They shall come from North and South and East and West, all of them...and feast together..." Our partner church, the Unitarian Church in Bolon, has already broken this bread tonight some seven hours ago. They look at each other in the eye when they offer bread to each other. Perhaps you might try that. There is nothing alcoholic, by the way, on the table. And there are all kinds of breads, including wheat and gluten free.*

*The firelight is a sign that, though each human light is welcome and worthy, together in community we make a greater light, one that may illumine far beyond the walls of this place.*

*Blest is the board of life, the table of love.*

*Blest is the light of life, and the communion of fire.*

### **Kindling**

### **Silent Night with gestures**

### **Blessing:**

Take Christmas inside you, says Moore.

Let it overshadow your fears and your hurt.

Allow the new light to take residence in you, he says. And no matter what you believe, live out your lives in peace, for the mythic angels reminded us, the glory of God is people here on earth living in peace with one another.