

# Christmas Evensong

December 24, 2013

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

**Welcome**

**Prelude** for Piano and Flute    *Pastorale de Noel*

*by Akira Tanaka*

*Nathan Hamm, piano*

*Sarah Wurdlow, flute*

**Kindling the Grail**    *the sign of our heritage*

**Opening Words**    *please rise*

We are here

*on a winter night*

to celebrate that life can thrive

*beyond circumstance and place*

and that peace and goodwill

*are not just our roots, but wings.*

**And so, lit by an ancient star**

**tonight, and visited by the**

**angels of story, flame, carol,**

**and table, we begin in peace.**

**Carol**    **#256 Winter Night**

**Sequence**    Nocturne for 2013

So what might an angel look like?

Take out your palette and paintbrush

and have a go, even if you don't think

you have much skill at this kind of thing.

Try to imagine this. It's late at night.

A winter night. It's quiet.

And then all of a sudden,

an angel shows up.

What do you think that angel looks like?

Well, maybe you'll tell me that you are

going to leave the page

completely blank.

After all, you'll say, there are really  
no such things, so why paint them?  
People just imagine such creatures.  
Invent them out of whole cloth.  
Or misinterpret a cloud.

Or, maybe you'll be the one  
who'll paint a beautiful creature with  
great wings, wings with deep blue,  
almost indigo, feathers almost blocking  
out the stars, and wearing a gown the  
color of opals...  
you're trying to show us  
a really impressive being, one  
that anyone would be foolish to ignore.

Or maybe, just maybe, you are more  
the metaphor type, and never thought  
of angels as beings with wings in the  
first place. You might paint images from  
the last dream you remember that shook  
you up when you remembered it;  
or the last time you laughed  
so hard that you learned something new;  
maybe you'll try to paint the feeling you  
felt when you saw that version  
of Dickens' famous Christmas Carol  
down at CATCO where Tiny Tim was  
played by a marionette,  
and you found your throat  
catching as he said, "God bless us,  
everyone," and Uncle Scrooge, now  
transformed, sang carols with his  
suddenly amazing voice.

Maybe you'll paint a star that glistens  
in your tears of gratitude that you live  
at all beneath such a bright and glorious  
sky; or maybe you'll paint your best  
friend, or a grandparent you loved.

In any case, maybe just trying to  
picture an angel might give you some  
sense about how truthfulness blossoms  
in every image and no image,  
no matter who the artist is,

even you, even me.  
And maybe the next angel  
that descends might not be on paper,  
nor in the paint, but in something much  
quieter, like this silent, silent night.

## Silence for a Time

### **Musical Nocturne** *Bright and Glorious Is the Sky* (a Danish Melody)

**The First Lesson** for Christmas Eve is from an ancient Gospel, which means great news! when translated from the Greek, but when translated from the Aramaic, the language Jesus actually spoke, the same idea is better translated as "Great Hope!" in English. This book of Great Hope was written, it is said, by Loukas, whom we call Luke in English. The author writes in better Greek than the other Gospel writers, which is all we really know about him. The first version was written as early as 90, perhaps even a decade later, and thus almost a hundred years after the era he is describing. We think it was written in Ephesus, a great metropolis in what is now Turkey. Luke is the traditional name for the author, dating from the mid-second century, so we cannot know for sure who the author was. Paul, in one of his authentic letters, talks about a certain Luke, whom he calls a "beloved and brilliant physician," but that fellow would have been long gone by the time the gospel was written. The translations are new, and are intended to get you to hear what those who first heard these stories in Greek would have understood by this story.

Long ago, the exalted Caesar issued an order saying that the entire empire 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, and thus had to leave Nazaret up in the Galilee where he had been living, and travel south to his home village, David's old hamlet, called Bethlehem. He traveled there with Mary, his fiancée, who, embarrassingly, 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 where the other family guests were staying.

Nearby were meadows, where sheepherders 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 a certain brightness flashed around them. They were terrified by all this. But the voice of the messenger comforted them, saying: "There is nothing to be afraid of. We are only offering you some unexpected hope. 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 the traditional strips of linen. And, as is often the case, you'll see the child sleeping in a bed of hay within a cattle-feeder."

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 on high is when people on earth live in willing peace with each other."

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

*The Second Lesson is the poem On Angels by Czeslaw Milosz, winner of the Nobel Prize. One of the last great events in my days in California was a night when I got to hear Milosz, Alan Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich and so many other great poets read their own work. I heard Milosz read this poem that night.*

#### **On Angels**

All was taken away from you: white dresses,  
wings, even existence.  
Yet I believe you,  
messengers.

There, where the world is turned inside out,  
a heavy fabric embroidered with stars and beasts,  
you stroll, inspecting the trustworthy seams.

Short is your stay here:  
now and then at a matinal hour, if the sky is clear,  
in a melody repeated by a bird,  
or in the smell of apples at close of day  
when the light makes the orchards magic.

They say somebody has invented you  
but to me this does not sound convincing  
for the humans invented themselves as well.

The voice -- no doubt it is a valid proof,  
as it can belong only to radiant creatures,  
weightless and winged (after all, why not?),  
girdled with the lightening.

I have heard that voice many a time when asleep  
and, what is strange, I understood more or less  
an order or an appeal in an unearthly tongue:

day draw near.  
another one.  
do what you can.

### **Carol #233 Bring A Torch, Jeannette, Isabella**

***The Third Lesson is the poem "Eight. Doing the Dishes" by Jeanne Lohmann 2007***

*Jeanne Lohmann used to live in Columbus OH, as many of you will be able to tell from the street names. I thank my colleague, the Rev. Kathleen Fowler, for bringing this amazing poem to my attention.*

We lived in so many houses, Gloria; Indiana Avenue, Summit and Fourth, the double on Hudson Street. And that upstairs apartment on North High we rented from Armbrusters. Mother thought it Elizabethan, romantic, with its leaded glass windows and wood-beamed ceilings. Our entrance was at the side, at the top of stairs that creaked late at night when we came home from our dates. You had more of these than I did, even if I was older. It was 1943, and our brother Harry was in the Navy. I'd had a year away at college, and you were still in high school. On this particular night in the kitchen, doing the supper dishes, you drying while I washed, you told me that your friend Monabelle had a premature baby, and you'd been there, helped to find a shoebox to put the baby in. I tried to imagine this, kept seeing the cardboard box with the baby, Monabelle bleeding and crying. You didn't want our parents to hear, so we talked softly while we put the dishes in the drainer on the sink and hung the towels to dry. The pilot light on the range burned purple blue and I saw both of us new in that light, you with so much to teach me, my self-absorbed studious life, so intent on saving the world.

**Carol 227 Creche Flickers Bright Here**

**Homily**

None of us, I have to imagine, actually *remember* anything about the day we were born. If we know anything at all about that day, it's because someone who was there told us about it.

As I mentioned once before at this service, my mother told me many times about my own birth... naming the doctor (Dr. Powell) and the Nurse (Pauline). Back in those days before Lamaze, men like my father didn't really know much about the birthing process, so when I was brought out to him, my head all distorted by the forceps and just the birthing process per se, he got all-a-fluster, terrified, really, and my grandmother had to calm him down forcefully.

My mother didn't tell me about any angels singing their halos off, or making announcements. I don't suppose your mother told you such things either. And, Alexander Blaine Hospital, I have to imagine, was a bit, well, *cleaner*, than any place where you might keep sheep supper in a feeding trough. And although my grandmother *had* actually been an honest-to-God shepherd back in the old country, she was no longer a shepherd when I was born.

So even if you never heard a single story about your own human birth, it's a safe bet to guess that not too many angels and shepherds showed up at your debut anyway, stories or not.

After all, you and I, we're only mortal.

But then, so was the babe whose fabled birth we recount every year at this time. His birth legend is the *only* story I tell over and over again over the years. Today is the 37th time I have read this

tale. And when the first people heard this story, recounted a hundred years after it happened, not one of them, not one of them, mind you, thought that all these angels and shepherds meant something theological, namely, that this baby was not *really* a fully human, mortal being, but the second person of the Trinity disguised as a baby.

Virginal conceptions were not "miracles" in those days, either...everyone seemed to be doing it, from Caesar on down. The story of his mother's unusual pregnancy is one story set amidst a thousand such stories in ancient times. It was simply a way of saying – in the language they used back then – that, well, *this child is important*. Really important. Our 21st century fussiness about biological issues was never their concern.

Same thing with angelic visions and the visiting astrologers. Magi told the fortunes of several Roman emperors too, and the Emperor Constantine saw a vision in the sky no less than the fabled shepherds. Such stories were simply another way of saying that something really significant was going on. In Luke's case, he was saying quite clearly that this baby was really important, and equal in dignity to the grand poobah of the Roman Empire himself. Not a bad message that. Inherent worth and dignity we say today, much less dramatically. Even peasants like Joseph and Mary, who had to eke out a living from stony ground, instead of sipping rose-petal wine by a marble pool, were equally significant and important.

Wrapping up a baby? Something the midwife did to *every* baby. Laid in straw? A common medical piece of advice even back then, and not just for poor families. This is a totally human being...like we all were when we were born. And very important, like we all still are. Each in our own way. Each with our own gifts.

The poet Jeanne Lohmann gets this message very well; she is living in Columbus during the 40s, the war is going on, her brother is in the military...lots of tension there. And what happens? Her younger sister, Gloria, still in high school, has a friend named Monabelle who gets pregnant. We don't know the details...we just know that back in the 1940's, having a baby "out of wedlock," as they used to say, was pretty close to being the "end of the world," a focus of shamefulness we can scarce imagine these days.

Worse, the pregnancy suffers some medical complication, and the babe is born prematurely. We don't know how much...again, the technical details are not important to the poet. What impresses her is that her sister took the tender young babe, frighteningly helpless, and finds a shoebox to put it in, presumably filled with some sort of blanket. We don't know what happens next. Again, to the poet, not as important as what she says to her sister to close the poem: *You didn't want our parents to hear, so we talked softly while we put the dishes in the drainer on the sink and hung the towels to dry.*

*The pilot light on the range burned purple blue,  
and I saw both of us new in that light, you  
with so much to teach me, my self-absorbed  
studious life, so intent on saving the world.*

So intent on saving the world. Wow.

Jeanne, the poet, is off at college and has great intentions as to what saving the world might look like. Peace initiatives, perhaps; maybe some protest envisioned against the rampant racialization of that era. Her sister, however, without any fuss or bother, apparently, steps right into an embarrassing and very messy situation (at least as such a situation was defined in those days), and wraps the baby up and puts the child into a shoebox. No visible panic...just responding to the world as it really is, directly and intimately. Gloria is a messenger of a different kind of salvation than the one so often lifted up these days in bully pulpits...salvation from eternal torture in hell, or salvation from the undeniable fact of death.

Gloria turns out to be an angelic messenger to her sister Jeanne...the Greek word for messenger is ἄγγελος or *angel* as we say in English. It's meaning: not a creature with wings in a white dress, but this: envoy, bringer of exciting news, announcer of the hope that is right before your eyes. I even have to wonder about the irony of the younger sister's name. Gloria. The song sung by the choir of messengers in the ancient story. Luke composed their song lyrics like this: "The true glory of God on high is when people on earth live in willing peace with each other." Which in the famous Latin translation we sang earlier, begins "Gloria!" *Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra. Pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.*

This is exciting news. There is hope here. When you think of Ultimacy, or the Sublime, or G-d... forget Caesar with his purple robe and rose-petal wine by the pool. Forget the CEOs of corporations gobbling each other up as fast as lions eating carrion. Forget the great bejeweled preachers at the mega-churches wearing Rolexes as they lounge around their mansions, as their driver brings around their Rolls. Forget Power and Glory that shines, shakes, punishes, excludes, threatens and swaggers with entitlement. If you want to see a picture of Ultimacy, Gloria's message goes, you might want to look at a baby in a shoebox, and start there. Or as Luke put it, a baby in a cattle feeder. An ordinary baby that, like all of us, no matter rank or class, is important simply by being. Gloria is, her sister thinks, something of a messenger, an angel, for doing what she did.

The poet Milosz talks about messengers, or angels who have come to him. Oh, he is a modern fellow all right. He tells us so right at the beginning of his poem "On Angels": *All was taken away from you: white dresses, wings, even existence. Yet I believe you, messengers.*

Sounds a bit ironical, doesn't it? And Milosz drove some of his colleagues up the wall because he used to attend mass at St. Mary Magdalene in Berkeley CA almost every day when he was in town. I used to see him walking to the place, or coming home from there frequently. "You don't really believe that stuff?" his colleagues scoffed. And he would say, "Oh, you're right. They don't exist, those angels, but I believe them: I have faith in their message."

And what did the messengers, the angels say to him? He addressed them directly again as he begins to answer that question: *They say somebody has invented you but to me this does not sound convincing, for humans invented themselves as well.*

*The voice -- no doubt it is a valid proof,  
as it can belong only to radiant creatures,*

*weightless and winged (after all, why not?),  
girdled with the lightening.*

*I have heard that voice many a time when asleep  
and, what is strange, I understood, more or less  
an order, or an appeal, in an unearthly tongue:*

*day, draw near. another one. do what you can.*

Do what you can. Do what YOU can. In the new day. Every day. They will keep on coming, you know. One day after the next. Don't think you need to be Caesar, saving the world by power and might. Don't think you need to be the CEO of Salvation Incorporated, or preach to a stadium of people who think you are dispensing God's own truth once and for all. The Christmas message undermines all of that thinking. The poets undermine that kind of thinking.

Do what YOU can, every day. As it draws near, make a plan to respond to the real world as it is...the real world as it is today, so accurately portrayed, I always say, in the ancient story. It's all there, isn't it? Poverty. Oppression. Exclusion. Monstrous financial practices that keep the powerful in place. Respond to this real world only as YOU can. Intimately. Directly. Face your friend with an alcohol problem honestly. Admit your own struggles with addiction to yourself. Give what you can to a homeless organization even if it's five bucks, or come cook meals for the homeless here at the church or at the YWCA. Talk to someone who is ashamed about something, and let them know you are not ashamed of them at all. Visit a homebound senior for a half hour. Do what YOU can do, not what Caesar can do. He usually makes a shambles of it anyway.

Keep your eye on the babe in the box, or in the manger. And yes, then bring this message to others...be an angel yourself without lightning girding your cloak, or a Latin song on your lips, or even wings on your back. But live out the message of the season....each of us is important, inherently worthy, by being born...in a hospital or barn...makes no difference... into a world we all share. Keep on doing that...and the sky indeed may open up, right before your eyes, and you'll catch a glimpse of something you never thought was there.

## **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, which this year partially benefits the family shelter of the YWCA.*

## **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, across the sea, 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 only a little bit of white wine, by the way, on the table. There's lots of scented water, grape juice,



and almond milk and honey. And there are all kinds of breads, including wheat, with and without raisins, and gluten free puffs.

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.

We give thanks this night together, for the nourishment that sustains us as we make our way.

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

**Carol:           The Holly and the Ivy**

*(getting the candles ready, and the communion table ready)*

**Kindling the Christmas Candleabrae**

*as Messiaen plays quietly*

**Silence**

**Singing Silent Night together, humming it first.**

**Silence**

**Blessings** (the readings on the cover)

All leave the Meeting House silently, taking communion to nourish you on your way.