

Christmas Evensong

December 24, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Welcome Lane Campbell

Centering Time *Nathan plays Liszt*

Kindling the Grail

the sign of our heritage of light

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 good will

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 Christmas Eve

This night has come at last.

This particular night.

After a few days of spring-like warmth,
and spring-like rain.

But tonight the stars are hidden
under the dark tent of wet cold clouds.

Perhaps they are filling up with snow for tomorrow,
or perhaps not, but tonight they are simply above us
and letting us know they're there,
by misting on us.

Inside, our room here is warm, the candles flicker,
poinsettias, like unexpected angels,
spread their bright red wings.

We know that others in this world
also gather on this night, in places old or modern,
to celebrate this Christmas evening
in a variety of ways.

We also know some do not gather, but remain alone,
Or, must greet this evening from a hospital bed.

Others dislike this night, and just stay home and watch old movies, or go out and eat Chinese. We know some who are bent under the weighty contrast of this tinsel-bright season with their own more lonely, or isolated lives.

And we know many for whom this is not so much a holiday as just another Wednesday, people working on the other side of the world to sweep shops, perhaps, or deliver babies, or cook breakfast, or avoid stepping on land mines, or beg for food, or light a stick of incense to Ganesh under the golden spires of Mumbai's newest temple, or do homework in Mongolia while wearing a baseball cap and t-shirt inside a warm *ger*, knowing from school that it's Christmas in some parts of the world, but having never even heard Silent Night even once, or quite knowing what it means.

But tonight, *we* are here. Not elsewhere.

Under this wooden gable. No other.

With our whole lives with us, yes,

but now pressed back inside us a bit

so we can be more fully alive here on this rainy Christmas Eve in Columbus Ohio,

as we enter a time of safe and soothing silence.

Silence for a Time

Musical Nocturne *Liszt Nocturne*

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!" which fits well for the theme I've been lifting up all December. 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 70 years after the era he is describing. We think it was written in Ephesus, a great metropolis in what is now Turkey. The translations of the ancient texts I read each year 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. She wrapped him up tight in swaths of cloth to prevent the babe from hurting himself, according the custom of the days.

Nearby were meadows, 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 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 cattle-feeder on a bed of straw."

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 on High

Lesson 2. *This is Billy Collins's amazing poem Flying Over West Texas on Christmas published in 2013. As is typical of this particular North American poet, the reading is both playful and very, very serious, using surprisingly homely and contemporary metaphors to describe what it means to be a human being on Christmas eve.*

O little town, far below,
with a ruler line of a road running through you,
you anonymous cluster of houses and barns
miniaturized by this altitude,
in a land as parched as Bethlehem might have been
somewhere around the year zero....

a beautiful song should be written about you,
which choirs could sing in their lofts
and carolers standing in a semi-circle
could carol in front of the houses trapped with snow.

For surely some admirable person was born
within the waffle-grid of your streets,
who then went on to perform some small miracles,
placing a hand on the head of a child,
or shaking a cigarette out of a pack for a stranger.

But maybe it's best not to compose a hymn
or chisel into tablets the code of his behavior,
or convene a tribunal of men in robes to explain his words.
Let us not press the gold leaf of his name onto a page of vellum, or hang his image from a nail.
Better to fly over this little town with nothing
but the hope that someone visits his grave once a year, making her way toward him through the rows of
others, before bending to prop up some flowers before the stone.

Carol #247 O Little Town of Bethlehem

Lesson **3.** *is an excerpt from a longer poem by my favorite California poet, Julia Vinograd*
On Being Told This Is The Most Important Time In History 2002

The only history I believe is "Once Upon a Time."
Everything else is either alibis of what went wrong,
basically, "the dog ate my homework"
or "rah, rah, me."
Once upon a time, in the middle of a forest
where birds tear up maps to line their nests,
where baby rabbits play inside a soldier's boot,
and in a thatched cottage a young girl sews warring flags together to make a dancing dress with
flouncing underskirts of many colors.
She sings "la, la, La. La, la."
Red blue green yellow orange with a bunch of ribbons at her throat.

Back in the world of TV and newspapers,
all are eaten by "now." "Now" is a knife through history.
Questions cut the tightrope you are walking on.
Don't look down. Don't panic. Don't argue.
And I know what they mean is Don't Sing.
La, la. La. La, la.

Carol #227 Creche Flickers Bright Here

Homily Hope: with Straw, a Few Ruffians and A Remarkable Nocturne

Not everyone who was raised in a church school back in 1950s Detroit took interest in the theology we were being taught. I had friends who rolled their eyes even as ten-year-olds, and who dismissed the whole lot of it as, and I quote: "silly." Others were quite devout, and entered deeply into lives of prayer which they continue to this day. And a few, like me, always felt caught in the middle someplace. For me, it may have been this way simply because my grandmother Anna was a good example of a devout and practicing Catholic woman, while her husband, my grandfather Umberto, was an atheist who could probably give even Richard Dawkins a few lessons on anti-religious furor. The thing is, I loved them both, dearly, and they seemed to love each other, so I think, within my heart, I held both of their perspectives in paradoxical tension.

Maybe, I still do.

But unlike most of my schoolmates, I *did* think deep and long about theology. I had lots of questions about certain teachings I was raised with in my childhood religious tradition, and they seemed important to me. Most importantly, since this is Christmas Eve, when I was taught that Jesus was both God and human being at the exact same time, 100% of each, I resisted and raised many questions, none of which I ever vocalized to my teachers, knowing somehow they would be irritating. But the idea made no sense to me, no matter how I framed it. If Jesus really was a

human being like me, he had to be human in a way I could understand. Because, after all, I lived within my own skin, and knew my own humanity best. For me, being human wasn't merely a question of sweating on hot days, or growing thirsty after working hard on some carpentry project, as my teachers always used to suggest was "the humanity" of Jesus.

Big deal. Cows sweat in the sun, too. It wasn't even a question of having bad dreams at night, or having a tummy ache now and then. My friend Mike's pet Spaniel suffered the same indignities.

No, if Jesus was born a human, he couldn't be God in any ordinary meaning of that word that I can think of. He couldn't be like the fabled Clark Kent, merely pretending to be weak, hiding the fact that he was Superman and could do anything. He couldn't know the future, like any God I can think of could do. I couldn't do that, and I most certainly was a human being, wasn't I? Jesus certainly couldn't work his famous wonders literally if he was a human being. These stories of water into wine, walking on the waves, feeding thousands with nothing, healing the sick must have been parables, I reasoned. Wisdom tales, not historical events. I certainly knew *I* couldn't perform such wonders. He would have had to make good wine like my grandfather did – with long months of work and waiting, not by snapping his fingers at a wedding.

And, I figure, sometime or other he must have hauled off and yelled at his younger brother, like I did, when he irritated me, as younger brothers sometimes do. He must have pouted when he was mad, and wanted to kick Joseph his father in the shins sometimes after being severely scolded. And he certainly could not have known that he would survive his own death in such a classy way, since I knew, as an ordinary ten-year-old boy, I certainly didn't expect a stone to roll away from my grave. He couldn't be some immortal being dressed up in a mortal suit. No, if he was human, he had to be *really* human. Mistakes, resentment, limits. Pettiness even. That's human too.

He had to forget to send proper thank you notes, or the birthdays of good friends, get scared out of his wits, worry, shaking his foot like I used to when I was anxious, or feel truly powerless on some days. To be human meant to cry for no reason sometimes, or feel furious without really altogether knowing why. It meant making friends, and also having friendships end. It meant crying on the floor for an hour when your cousin Linda dies of leukemia at age six. It meant being lonely. It meant being uncertain most of the time, and wrestling with guilt and shame too.

All that was clear to me. Jesus, as human being, must have been at least like that. Now I knew back then that other human beings, ten-year-old human beings like me, lived in the world too. I knew they had rougher lives than me, or Jesus for that matter – kids my age who lost a limb in a war, or who were thin and swollen from lack of food. I know some kids weren't allowed to even think about theology like I could, and others who had never heard of Jesus. But still, we all shared a common humanity.

But the God part? Fully God and fully human, at the exact same time? Like the ancient 1600 year old doctrine stated?

Couldn't imagine what that meant.

Still can't, really.

Except perhaps....hmmm, let me unpack this a bit.

The Christmas legend as it's written doesn't pull any punches about human life. Not just the very real reality of childbirth pains. Or the painful lack of clarity as to paternity. Or the expected parental worries after a ridiculously uncomfortable journey, but the burdens of an occupying army in uniforms all around you, supporting a regime which can tax your life away. Then there is that painful lack of privacy for something so intimate as a birthing; or some prickly straw instead of a nice orthopedic mattress; or worse, those uninvited suspects lollagagging around – after all, shepherds in those days had a reputation... whether they deserved it or not – as disreputable ruffians, dressed in rags, with their hands in the till, and always up to no good.

Luke doesn't paint a particularly heavenly portrait, but something entirely, and almost excruciatingly human. Not the disguised humans depicted on our TV and movie-house screens, dressed in gold lamé, or celebrated on magazine covers. Like Jesus would comment when he grew older about the prophet John: *What is it that you expected to see? Someone dressed in fancy clothes? But wait! Those who wear fancy clothes are found in palaces!*

No, no palaces, not even King Herod's. No Hollywood. No Donald Trump. No CEO's making millions, or Wall St. gamblers. Not even some promise of a divine Heaven above the clouds, perhaps, where the streets are paved in gold, according to the alarming pop theology claimed by 58% percent of all citizens of our country. No, Luke offers us no razzle-dazzle about the birth of Jesus.

So, the only Jesus that makes sense to me, both now and when I was a kid, is someone who is as far away from a palace as you can get.

Billy Collins seems to have some of the same questions about humanity and divinity that I have had all my life. On Christmas he is flying over a small town in Texas for some reason. He makes several references to *O Little Town of Bethlehem* as he begins his poem. He imagines that in the grid of streets down in another "little town" below, another human being is being born who is also "admirable," presumably as admirable as Jesus, worthy of carols, he says, but entirely unknown, un-celebrated. He describes him as simply human – he pats children on the head; as a smoker, like many around him in his small Texas town, he kindly offers one of his own to a complete stranger. A small and very homely kindness to be sure. But Collins refers to these events as "miracles." And then he makes sure to carefully describe this unknown fellow as entirely mortal. Someone who will be mourned.

I was moved by this poem. Collins seems to read the Christmas tale as I do, this political legend crafted by Luke 80 years after the actual birth of Jesus, which was presumably somewhere up in The Galilee. Collins clearly gets the "Once Upon a Time" character of the story. It's a very human story. Nothing Wall Street or golden palace about it. It all takes place in an ordinary Bethlehem peasant home with a cattle feeder for the animals on one side and a basin for washing on the other side – for the crowd of people. Not even a wall between them. And, nothing even particularly Jewish or Christian about it.

We know this is Collins' Christmas theology because he makes clear there is something *just as beautiful* happening in this backwater small Texas town he is flying over, as happened "once upon a time" long ago in Bethlehem. Collins does not look down from his plane expecting to see a royal mansion, hear a choral symphony of celestial music, behold a convention of Texas oil magnates, or watch the whole world below him being upended by a divine and furious Messiah, just like that, with the people just watching it all being done for them.

Instead, Collins is finding something deep and even, shall I say, *divine* and even *holy* in a simple, unassuming, and totally human life.

But what about those angels in the original story, and that song about peace and good will? Nobody believes in angels anymore do they? Supernatural beings that sing *holy holy holy* in flowing gowns? Isn't that a little Hollywood for such a human story?

Oh my. That worn-out word "belief" again. I tell you truly, the older I get, the less I find that the word "belief," and its twin sidekick "unbelief," do anything but aggravate me. Belief "that" something is true or untrue in some absolute sense. I'm not sure I understand what that means anymore. I'd rather look out of the plane window and just imagine, creatively, like Collins does.

And actually, I find California poet Julia Vinograd's lines immensely helpful here. "The *only* history I believe is "Once Upon a Time." Everything else is either alibis of what went wrong, basically, "the dog ate my homework" or "rah, rah, me."

Yeah, rah rah me...the modern distorted history of the US of A, with a thousand *Selfies* put in the place of a portrait by Dorothy Lange of a poor woman in the Depression, which, I assure you, demands a different response than a selfie. Or rah rah me: the song sung by that other non-angelic choir of bad will, singing without remorse, the talking heads on radio and TV making sure we all know it's *always* someone else's fault – "don't look at me – "I'm not a racist, I'm not a bully, I've got no disrespect for anyone, but ya know *those* people – "

So against this tidal wave of unconsciousness in this modern world of war, conflicts with children dying, and refusal to take any responsibility, Vinograd fights back with a very conscious and imaginative "once upon a time" story of a fairy-tale forest where the people have ended their wars, made peace, set down their uniforms, and the birds are tearing all the old battle maps for nesting material. It can be done, she is saying. It can be done. By you and by me.

Luke is not being Hollywood with his angel-song story. Instead, he says something similar to what Vinograd says. After crafting a story of poverty, danger and worry, a story not entirely different than the present "now" moment, he writes of this choir of angels, messengers, offering hope to this collection of ruffians, standing there on a hillside almost as dry as Texas. Then they sing this song: "The true glory of God on high is when people on earth live in willing peace with each other."

There you have it. You can't talk about God, or Ultimacy, or Divinity, or Spirit, call it what you will, without talking about the real lives of human beings.

Claiming to say anything about God, for or against, without making willing peace with each

other first, makes no sense to me at all. No one else is going to make peace for us – not even God. Not even a mighty Messiah. Peace is the creation of human beings who have given up making excuses, given up blaming the dog, or the Democrats, or anyone else you can think of. The miracle of peace, Collins reminds us, begins as simply and as homely as patting a child tenderly on the head. It doesn't ultimately require any of us waiting around for royalty, Caesars, Presidents or Prime Ministers . Even these ruffian shepherds, no intellectuals to be sure, Luke says, know this. They do what any other human being would do – they show up to serve as witnesses to a freshly born human child.

But, says Julia Vinograd: Back "in the world of TV and Newspapers," everything is being devoured by "now." "Now," she says, "is a knife through history." Yes, indeed. It's a knife through "once upon a time" as well. The wars and rumors of wars. The guns in schools. The whole mess around race and law and power in our country. What is happening right NOW seems to eclipse everything else. We find ourselves questioning everything we once held sacred and certain in this nation. As Vinograd affirms, those

Now voices are shouting to one and all:
Don't look down. Don't panic. Don't argue.
And I know what they mean is Don't Sing.
La, la. La. La, la.

And certainly don't sing *anything* about the Glory of God being *exactly the same thing* as *willing peace among human beings*. You wanna cause trouble or something?

Right. All I know is that I want to sing about Christmas. To celebrate this "once upon a time" story more than anything else on Christmas Eve. To allow myself to be reminded about what I knew as a ten-year-old, and what those ruffians knew as they stood amidst their sheep, namely, that Christmas is a tender, honest, unflinching invitation to a very human hope of peace – which will not descend from on high, but will arrive as we embrace, solve conflicts without violence, and make a positive peace with each and for each other. Starting now...

Carol #233 Bring A Torch

Offertory *The gifts you give this evening go to the Ministers' Discretionary Fund, which provides food, shelter and other needs on an emergency basis.*

Nathan plays Liszt

Table Prayer and Blessing of the Flame

Mark: The table at the rear of this room is a sign that no one may be kept away from the nourishment they need to be truly alive. 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 the food to each other, various breads dipped into a cup. Perhaps you might try that. But no matter, all are welcome to this supper, which never was a matter of belief, or unbelief, in the first place, but of community choosing to share the food of life at a common table.

The candles we light tonight are signs that, though each individual 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.

Lane: Therefore, blest is the food on the table of life and love. We give thanks this night together, for the nourishment that sustains us together as we make our way. May we know gratitude in our very bodies that we live at all, that we are alive at this moment, and that we are together at this particular moment of human history.

Blest is the light of life and love, and the community of many flames: precious individuals within precious community. *This* is what is most holy – sanctissima. This is what awakens hope. This is what invites us to embody Love most deep and most high in our own human lives.

Carol #236 O Thou Joyful Day

Kindling the Christmas Candelabrae

Nathan plays Liszt

Silence for a time

Circle Carol Silent Night *from memory* or #251

Blessing of the Assembly

We leave the Worship Center in silence

The Closing Act of Community and Gratitude

As you leave the Meeting House in Silence, please take a bit of the Christmas feast on the table by the door (there is gluten-free bread so marked, wine and grape juice so marked. The milk is almond milk).

There is gluten and wheat free bread and also Italian Panettone, a Christmas yeast bread. By this simple act, we make clear that the babe whose birth we recount in parable form tonight did not remain a babe, but grew to adulthood, when he told many parables inviting people to respond with questions, hope and a hunger for justice. As a grown-up, he welcomed all to his table, no matter what custom, taboo or scruple might have demanded they stay away. In true celebration of his life, we share the table he blessed as he did: with mutual greeting, embraces, and open welcome. Feel free to offer each other the food of the feast. Beside the breads, there are cups into which you may dip your bread: wine, or milk and honey, or scented water, for all of these were used, according to Hippolytus, in the earliest celebrations of this egalitarian supper.