

Christmas Eve Multigenerational Service
December 24, 2011 at 5 PM

Gathering Music

Susan Miron, harp

Sounding the Chime and Ringing the Paul Revere Bell

Introit

Down in the Valley
First Parish Children's Choir
Kate Campe, Director

S. Paulus

Welcome to All

John Buehrens, Minister

Call to Worship

Christmas Beatitudes

D. R. Williams

On this blessed night let us worship at the altar of joy,
For to miss the joy of Christmas is to miss its holiest secret.

*Let us enter into the spiritual delights which are the natural heritage
of all childlike hearts.*

Let us withdraw from the cold and barren world of prosaic fact,
if only for a season.

*That we may warm ourselves by the fireside of fantasy,
and take counsel from the wisdom of poetry and legend.*

Blessed are those who have vision enough to behold a guiding star in the dark
mystery which surrounds our earth.

*Blessed are those who have imagination enough to detect the music of
celestial voices in the midnight hours of life.*

Blessed are they who have faith enough to contemplate a world of peace and
justice in the midst of present wrong and strife.

Blessed are they who have greatness enough to become as little children.

Blessed are they who have zest enough to take delight in simple things.

*Blessed are they who have wisdom enough to know that the kingdom of
heaven is very close at hand, and all may enter in who have eyes to see
and ears to hear and hearts to understand.*

Chalice Lighting

The Morrison-Montgomery family

May that Light made to grow
in a poor child born long ago,
be now found in us also,
helping us to come to know
how to make sad hearts to glow.

(J. Buehrens, 2011)

*Hymn 247

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Forest Green

Reading

And It Came to Pass
Ezra Morrison, reader

Luke 2

And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And Joseph also went up from Galilee unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

Anthem

The Last Month of The Year
First Parish Christmas Quartet
Beth, Jim, and Margaret Sargent with David Blom

Trad. Gospel

Reflection

No One Knows When Jesus Was Born

C. Schmidt

No one really knows at what season Jesus was born. The very earliest Christians didn't celebrate birthdays, especially of good people. Only emperors and rulers had people celebrate when they were born: Julius Caesar in July, Caesar Augustus in August. King Herod and Pharoah made people celebrate their birthdays, too. But since the church also believed that the goodness that was in Jesus is what should really rule in human hearts, after a time some began to celebrate his birth. Despite the song we just heard, it wasn't in winter. It was in late March, or April, or May – in the springtime; which is when shepherds really are out in the fields

keeping watch over their flocks by night, something they don't do in the winter. But then churches in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire began celebrating on January 6, putting a Christian festival in place of one for the Greek god Dionysus. In Rome, however, the church saw people celebrating the festival of Saturnalia, and of Sol Invictus, the Unconquered Sun, on the 25th of December, and chose to celebrate the birth of Jesus on *that* day, and the visit of three kings from the East as Epiphany, on January 6. But surely the Unitarian educator Sophia Lyon Fahs was right when she suggested that we may need is a once-a-year reminder that every night that child is born is a holy night. "Fathers and mothers, sitting beside their children's cribs, feel glory in the sign of a new life beginning. They ask, 'Where and how will this new life end? Or will it ever end?'" Each night a child is born is a holy night – a time for wondering, a time for worshipping, a time for singing. Let's join together in singing "Once in Royal David's City," number 228 in the hymnals.

*Hymn 228

Once in Royal David's City

Irby

Once in royal David's city stood a lowly cattle she,
Where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed;
So may we when life turns hard find in love our stay and guard.

Shepherds came to see this wonder, and kneel in holy awe
At that lowly stable manger where in the infant lay on straw;
So may we this happy morn honor every child that's born.

For afar three magi journeyed to that stable rude and bare,
To pay homage to the infant, offering gifts both rich and rare;
So may we our gifts bestow, whether we be high or low.

In that happy Christmas spirit, hear the angels from on high
Sing their ancient salutations: joy's a gift you cannot buy.
So may we, with heart that sings, share the truth this season brings.

Joy is a gift you cannot buy. It comes by grace. And so let me express the hope that for each of you, you are able to find in this Christmastide grace-filled moments of peace, of quiet joy, of love and deeper meaning. Do not ask for more than moments, however. Our blessings may be as numerous as the very stars in the heavens, but unless we look up, against the backdrop of the sky is darkened, we may not see them.

“When it gets darkest the stars come out.” That proverb was the title of a sermon given here twenty years ago now by my good friend Ed Lane. One of you once told me that you could still remember the whole sermon, and how it affected you. The poet Theodore Roethke put it this way: “In a dark time the eye begins to see.” Whether it is the stars that shine brighter, or the eye that sees more acutely when it is dark, may be debated. But there are many ways to despise the world, and the life we share, and one of them is to deny or despise the dark. Without the night, after all, when would we rest, and dream? Without the shortened days of winter, how could Earth herself slumber and replenish?

So if you have been downcast in spirit this holiday season, I’d ask you not to despise the dark even when you feel it inside. Who knows? It may just be helping you prepare to see something new. Like a more creative, meaningful way of embracing life more fully. It’s happened before. Just don’t deny the reality of human need and vulnerability, including your own. It’s central to the story that brings us here tonight. One that may not be literally true – just eternally true.

Instead, “let us by one consent,” as Charles Dickens put it, use this season to “open our shut-up hearts, and see all our fellow mortals as our fellow passengers to the grave. Then perhaps may Christmas be once more a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time.” But let us not expect it to be only sweetness and light.

For it is in the dark that eyes begin to see. See that “the common welfare is our business: charity, mercy, forbearance,” peace-making, all our business.

In the New Year then, resolve to “Do what you can. Love what you have. Be who you are.” Do not deny the darkness. Nor curse it. Use it to better see all the stars. And then to light one candle – first in your own soul, then, God willing, in some other mortal’s time of need. For we also never know when a heart may glow.

Anthem

A Soalin’

Noel Paul Stookey

Prayer and Moments of Silence

Spirit of Life and Love, Light to enlighten ever soul that comes into the world, God of many names and Mystery beyond all our naming, we give thanks tonight that at this darkest time of year there comes to us the brightness of Christmas. Help us to believe and live its hope: that justice and peace may come at last on earth to all of goodwill. In our practiced pessimism it is easy for us to be cynical. The world about us is not as we would have it. And yet, and yet . . . somewhere tonight a soul trapped in addiction has surrendered at last to a Higher Power . . . somewhere a child estranged from her parents has returned home to tears and laughter . . . somewhere an aged soul, ready to die, has slipped into the peace of the Eternal. . . somewhere a surprising, welcome gift has been given with no expectation of exchange . . . somewhere a child has drawn first breath, and awed parents have found the primal joy of Christmas. O Great Spirit, greater than our own, you have given us the gift of life itself. Give us now the grace to accept it, the courage to embrace it, and the will to love it more fully. Enable us to expand the moments of joy in life, not for ourselves alone, but as those who push back the dark with the flame of illumined faith – this night, and evermore. Amen.

Musical Meditation

Interlude
from *Ceremony of Carols*

Benjamin Britten

Offertory Words

Freely have we received of gifts that minister to our needs of body and spirit. So now gladly we bring to this place of worship a portion of our bounty to share. The offering tonight will be used to help a homeless family at the Pathways Family Shelter in Framingham settle in a new home. The offertory anthem, written by my Tennessee friend, John McCutcheon, may sound like a modern legend, but it reflects an actual, historical event: the Christmas truce declared by soldiers in the trenches of World War I. I encourage you to be as generous in spirit.

Offertory

Christmas in the Trenches
(the offering will help a homeless family
from the Pathways Family Shelter in Framingham
move to permanent housing)

J. McCutcheon

Homily

A CHRISTMAS CAROL
FOR THESE TIMES
John Buehrens

It has been called the original modern Christmas legend. I'm referring, of course, to the classic tale by Charles Dickens, "A Christmas Carol." You grown-ups know the story; maybe most children, too. "Bah, humbug!" says Ebenezer Scrooge about Christmas. He's a tight-fisted old merchant. He even resents giving his underpaid clerk, Bob Cratchit, the day off from work, to spend with his struggling family, where the youngest child, Tiny Tim, is crippled and ill. I'll remind you of the rest in a few moments.

Some of you may even know the real history behind the story. Charles Dickens, whose 200th birthday is just two months away, was the second of eight children in his family; his father, a clerk who couldn't pay his bills. When Charles was 12, his father went to prison for unpaid debts. The family went to prison with him, as was the practice then – except for Charles, who was sent out to work – to work 10 hours a day, 6 days a week, pasting labels on shoe-polish in a warehouse. On Sundays, when he visited his family in prison, he had to sit through long sermons threatening hellfire and brimstone if sinners didn't repent.

As a young man, Dickens thought most religion was humbug. Instead, he went from being a court reporter to writing imaginative stories about real people, eliciting real sympathy for how they suffered real hurts and real injustice. By the time he was 30, he was a famous author, read not only in England, but here in America. In fact, when he came to visit in 1842, starting in Boston, the crowd around his hotel was so huge that he couldn't go out. He was like a rock star or movie star. So he was surprised when he was brought a note from a local minister named William Ellery Channing, who was the leader of Boston's Unitarians.

Please forgive the enthusiasm of Boston's people, said Dr. Channing. But your stories really touch them. Let me send a carriage for you tomorrow night. Have dinner with some local authors at the home of my fellow Unitarian, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Dickens gladly accepted. Over dinner they discussed how they might support one another when publishers in England stole the works of Americans, or Americans stole the works of English writers like Dickens. These were religious people, but of a different kind, these Unitarians. Practical, down-to-earth, compassionate – interested more in imitating the religion of Jesus than just beliefs about Jesus.

Shortly after returning to England, Dickens read in the paper that Dr. Channing had died. There was to be a memorial service for him at the Unitarian Chapel in Little Portland Street, London, led by its minister, Dr. Taggart. Dickens attended, and began going there Sundays as well. He talked to Taggart and joined the Unitarians. Christmas was near. He began writing a new story.

In it, Ebenezer Scrooge is visited in his dreams by the ghost of his old partner, Jacob Marley, warning him to change his ways if he wants anyone to remember him with any affection. During the weeks before Christmas, he is visited by spirits three more times. First, the Ghost of Christmas Past takes him back to his own wide-eyed wonder as a child, and shows him how he traded innocence for selfishness, became greedy, though he could have done otherwise, and came to call Christmas "humbug." Then the Ghost of Christmas Present shows him a wide-variety of scenes – prosperous people joyously buying presents and the making of Christmas dinner in a market; the meager Christmas feast faced by the family of his clerk, Bob Cratchit; and other homes – a miner's cottage, a lonely lighthouse – that remind him how he is responsible for his fellow human beings. The third, the Ghost of Christmas Future, frightens him with an image of Tiny Tim dying untreated, of Scrooge's own grave unvisited and untended, and more.

On Christmas morning, Scrooge awakens a changed man. He orders a prize turkey sent to the home of the Cratchits. He accepts an invitation to Christmas from his nephew Fred and family. He raises Cratchit's wages. He now treats others with kindness, generosity and compassion, gaining a reputation as one who embodies the spirit of Christmas.

Out in San Francisco this year, where my granddaughters live, a man name Michael Gene Sullivan has long been a fan of Dickens, and of this story in particular. He once played Scrooge's nephew in a staged production of *A Christmas Carol*. Later he put another version as a benefit performance for people with HIV-AIDS. But he never forgot how, when, dressed as one of the Christmas ghosts, he stood with a small basket, asking for donations after the performance, a well-dressed woman berated him. She clearly had missed the whole point of the story.

Sullivan is now the playwright in residence for a theater company. So this year, when the Occupy protests began on Wall Street and elsewhere, protesting how often the wealthiest 1% seem to push politicians toward policies that benefit them but increase economic inequality, deepen social problems, and overlook the other 99%, Sullivan knew what he had to do.

He wrote a version of *A Christmas Carol* for our times. It's set in an Occupy encampment outside a big bank. The Ghost of Christmas Past still reminds Scrooge of the child he once was and the paths he could have chosen on the way to making greed and gain the center of his life. The Ghost of Christmas Present still underscores the hard lives of living others – the unemployed, the uninsured, the wounded and impaired veterans and the banker's part in making them so. And the Ghost of Christmas Future still shows frightening images of a future of global warming and conflicts caused by an unsustainable economy, as well as a promise of redemption.

But this version is enlivened street theater, protest songs, and that normally mild-mannered clerk, Bob Cratchit, finally speaking up for himself. "People always think this story is about you," he tells Scrooge. "Just you . . . the one evil man! And if you change – everything is different, the world is transformed."

Then Cratchit delivers a message that goes well beyond individual change or charity:

“Well, it ain’t you . . . it’s the idea of you that’s killin’ us,” Cratchit tells Scrooge. The idea that at the end of the game, the one with the most toys somehow wins. “It’s steppin’ over the hungry and homeless to buy what we don’t need that’s killin’ us. It’s lettin’ them turn our government into a casino that’s killin’ us!”

“It ain’t about you,” Cratchit says. “It’s about us.” All of us.

I haven’t seen this version, mind you, just read about it. But it seems in line with this in Dickens: his ability to identify with all the key characters in his story, from Tiny Tim and Bob Cratchit to Scrooge himself. You see, when he wrote it, Dickens was conscious that he himself was entering what we might call “the 1%.” But it’s not just about Scrooge, is it? It is about all of us.

So when the morning comes, may we all find a way to bring about a better day. And in our resolve to lead a new life in the new year, and in all the years ahead, as Tiny Tim once put it, “God bless us everyone!” Merry Christmas!

*Hymn 245

Joy to the World!

Watts/Handel

Reading

The Imperishable Flame
(adapted from the Rev. Max Kapp, 1904-1979)

The Ministers

Blessed are the stars of the wintry night that sprinkle the floor of heaven
with their lustrous and far-shining light.

Blessed is the moon that seems like a lovely maiden walking in
The fields of sky, clothed with raiment of wondrous golden light.

Blessed is the sun with its great brightness, circling the seasons and bringing
the benediction of ever-renewed life to the earth.

Blessed are the hearth-fires, the lamps and tapers that hallow our homes
and make a glow of beauty within the surrounding shadows.

All these are wondrous fair. But blessed beyond all these is the light that lighteth every soul that comes into the world, the imperishable flame of the human spirit, touched into being by the Eternal.

O fire of reason, of leaping thought, of compassion, pity and friendship.
O insatiable burning of the hunger for beauty,
O glow from on high, kindled in the human heart, strangely, deathlessly!

Thou art the illumined glory by which we of earth fashion our visions and dreams of sweeter life and nobler living.

Thou are the sacred flame discerned in every age, by Persian and Jew,
Hindu and Christian, scientist and prophet, by sage and child.

We see the holy glowing this night in the manger cradle, and it signifies hope and promise to lift against the darkness of the night. Many have gone before us as guardians of this flame, to be way-showers and light-bearers, to dispel cruelty and injustice.

Now it is our watch. Now the light will move from the manger cradle to the silent and saddened and songless streets of the world only if our hearts carry it, and our hands shield it from the blasts of wintry selfishness.

Come then, apostles, great-hearts, dreamers, singers, poets, builders, and healers!
Carry the Sacred Flame to make light in the windows of the world.

It is we who must be keepers of the flame. It is we who must carry the
Imperishable fire. It is our watch now.

Candle Lighting

*Hymn 251

Silent Night

Gruber/Mohr

Closing Words

The Work of Christmas

Howard Thurman

Extinguishing the Candles and Benediction

John Buehrens

And now we extinguish the candles that we have lit as symbols,
But not the light of truth, the warmth of compassion,
Nor the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts.

May that Light made to grow
in a poor child born long ago,
be now found in us also,
helping us to come to know
how to make sad hearts to glow.

Postlude

Joy to the World!
Susan Miron, harp

Reprise