

A Meditation for Christmas Eve

A Sermon by Donald Mackenzie
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington
December 24, 2006

Text: Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace, good will among people.
Luke 2:14

Reading: Luke 2:8-20

On December 23rd in the year 1818, an Austrian pastor named Josef Mohr was walking home from a meeting of church members and he reached a place where he could see his entire village of Oberndorf, a village near Salzburg, spread out in the valley below, lights twinkling from candles and lanterns in homes and surrounded by fresh snow. As he stood there and observed that place, he remembered a poem he had started to composed several years before that began, "Silent Night, Holy Night." There it lay, the substance of this poem and as he walked home he put more words to it. As he approached his church of St. Nicholas, he discovered that the organ was broken and would not be able to be played on Christmas Eve the next evening. The musician of the church, Franz Gruber, was also a guitarist and a composer. Mohr shared the substance of his poem and Gruber picked up his guitar and together, they developed our most famous Christmas carol, Silent Night.

These are the sounds and this is the scene, is it not, that has the strongest pull for us on this night of nights. The snow and the silence convey a sense of being held, being held closely. It is a sort of "thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me" moment. And, of course the light is without doubt, the light of hope. To those shepherds keeping watch by night, to those whose rods and staffs were a comfort to their flocks, the image of a miracle in Bethlehem, and the light of hope brought by the angels, must have constituted a moment similar to what Pastor Mohr experience in Austria 18 centuries later.

Tonight as together we absorb this magnificent feeling of "all is calm, all is bright" on this deepest of nights, tonight as we give thanks for each other and for God's holy presence with us in this narrowest of passages, and tonight as we long for hope in this troubled world, let us be witnesses to a transformation that cannot be described in mere words. For indeed, tonight is the celebration of the birth of the Prince of Peace, tonight celebrates the coming of God into the world, the coming of light into our darkness and the return home from all of those distant places that imprison us and make us anxious or sad, tonight calls us to a renewed sense of our own purpose, of the need to be present to new possibilities waiting to be born in us, and reminds us that God is still speaking. Tonight empties us and it fills us.

Yes, tonight I am thinking of those shepherds out on that lonely mountainside so long ago, the poorest of the poor whose role in society was below the bottom, those shepherds to whom the good news was given by the angel. There is meaning in that. Tonight I am thinking of our shepherds today, those without a warm place to feel comfort and reassurance on this night, those without a candle to light, those without companionship, those without hope. Ah but to them, good news will come.

Tonight I'm remembering people in other parts of the world where violence is the rule of life: Jerusalem, Baghdad, Beirut, Kabul, places with names that evoke far away places, places in fact so far away that the pain of that life cannot find its way to this place where all is calm and all is bright.

And tonight I'm also thinking of those for whom this particular story has little or no meaning other than repression and pain, Jews, Muslims, Hindus Buddhists and others whose lives have not been honored by the actions of the Christian church.

Tonight I'm thinking of loneliness and sadness that even in the midst of this celebration is not finding solace. Yes, tonight I'm reminded that pain has been brought to this place by some whose faces try not to reveal it, cannot find space in the midst of celebration to make it known.

And so tonight as we lift a candle of hope into the darkness, as we physically reach out of ourselves toward that great mystery that comes to us and holds us even and especially in the worst moments of our lives, tonight let us find new meaning in the word "rejoice," the event where for one split second we are unselfconsciously free to hear, once again, the voice of the angels, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people, to you is born this day in the city of David, a savior." For as Howard Thurman has written in this little poem:

Where refugees seek deliverance that never comes,

And the heart consumes itself, if it would live,

Where little children age before their time,

And life wears down the edges of the mind,

Where the old man sits with mind grown cold,

While bones and sinew, blood and cell, go slowly down to death,

Where fear companions each day's life,

And perfect Love seems long delayed.

Christmas is waiting to be born;

In you and me, in all human kind.

Thanks be to God. Amen.