

Good Christmas Eve evening from a hill in Rockport.....

Well, we had about 25 hearty carolers in the church's parking lot at 4 p.m. today! We were earnest and happy to be together, no matter the varied strains of our singing. Thanks so much to all who joined Nance and me, helping us to embrace what we could of this holy night. NEXT Christmas Eve, we hope we will be back in our sanctuary, glad to be "home," grateful for renewed life after this vicious virus has taken its last toll on us, and more committed than ever to live into the lives Jesus would have us live each day.... Remember these words of that great philosopher, Dr. Seuss, "Christmas will always be as long as we stand heart to heart and hand in hand." Well, maybe soon we can be "hand in hand"....., but we can surely always be "heart to heart".....

Blessings to all on this Christmas Eve..... Susan

p.s. I will download this evening's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page tonight: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie will also be downloading the same onto the church's Facebook page.

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, December 24, 2020
Christmas Eve
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

O God of all flesh in ordinary places,
we come this night to wait and watch and wonder....
in cyberspace fellowship this time!
O God of new lives, young lives,
middle-aged lives and old lives,
we come in anticipation of good things,
in appreciation for community,
in love that we feel for one another and for you this night.
Let us begin our service,
from a physical distance but never a spiritual one,
of celebration of you and holy life born anew in Jesus
this night. Amen.

★ "Away in a Manger" ★

I invite you to sing, hum or just read these verses of this beloved carol....

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
the little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head.
The stars in the sky all looked down where He lay,
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes,
The little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes.
I love Thee, Lord Jesus! Look down from the sky,
And stay by my side until morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus! I ask Thee to stay
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
And fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there.

A Prayer of the People for Christmas Eve

O God, as we sing “Away In a Manger,”
we think of the many people who are away from home –
not with their families this Christmas Eve,
those sick in hospitals, those who are in prison,
those not at home because of work commitments
or attending school at a distance,
those in the military in hard places,
and all who are traveling this night,
even in the midst of this covid nightmare affecting us all
in one way or another, or many ways.

As we sing “no crib for a bed,” we pray for
the many homeless throughout the world –
those who have suffered loss in hurricanes, fires, and earthquakes,
as refugees from civil wars;
and those drifting from city to city looking for work.

As we sing “the little Lord Jesus laid
down his sweet head,” we think of those needing rest –
those fearing what lies ahead,
those who cannot sleep because of pain,
those who are struggling to make ends meet,
and those who work this night looking after the
health and safety needs of our community.

As we sing “the stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay,” we pray for
the light of your love to touch all those who have lost faith,

those who need their confidence and hope restored,
and those who face an uncertain future,
the leaders of our country,
and for ourselves.
May your love be born afresh in each of us this night,
that we may spread the light of your love to others. Amen.

A Reading of Scripture – Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was **no place for them in the inn.**

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “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, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

“No place for them in the inn”

A sermon based on Luke 2:1-14

“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by; yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light: the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” The opening words of this Christmas carol, which we didn’t sing earlier today in our parking lot, beckon us to thoughts of peace in the midst of chaos, to light in the midst of darkness, to hope in the midst of despair. All are met this night when we come together as a congregation of friends and family from near and far, not in person, but always in spirit.

You know I've always asked the same question over the years as I've lead Christmas Eve services. Why do we come together this night? The answers I've received from those celebrating the night with me always renew my faith in the power of community, the abiding blessing of love, and the holy work of the Spirit. Together – whether we are in the flesh, or in cyberspace, we are a family of seekers, believers, wannabe believers, doubters, and perhaps a few naysayers who are with us this night because someone who loves them and wants them to be here with us. To one and all, welcome this night.

I want to read to you a piece entitled, “The Work of Christmas.” It was written by the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, grandson of a slave, and the creator of the first racially integrated multicultural church in the United States in 1944, the Church for the Fellowship of all Peoples in San Francisco. Dr. Thurman wrote, “We believe that in the presence of God with His dream of order there is neither male nor female, white nor black, Gentile nor Jew, Protestant nor Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, nor Moslem, but a human spirit stripped to the literal substance of itself. Wherever men and women have the scent of the eternal unity in their spirit, they hunt for it in their home, in their work, among their friends, in their pleasures and in all the levels of function. It is my simple faith [Dr. Thurman wrote] that this is the kind of universe that sustains that kind of adventure. And what we are fumbling towards now . . . tomorrow will be the way of life for everybody!” Dr. Thurman lived as if every night was a still night in Bethlehem and every tomorrow would shine new light on the human condition.

I want to read to you a piece entitled, “For So the Children Come.” It was written by Rev. Sophia Lyon Fahs, who lived to the age of 101. She was a guiding light in the field of religious education for children, particularly in the Unitarian Universalist Church. She wrote, “The religious way is the deep way, the way that sees what physical eyes alone fail to see, the intangibles of the heart of every phenomenon. The religious way is the way that touches universal relationships; that goes high, wide and deep, that expands the feelings of kinship.” Rev. Fahs understood that “in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light.”

And I want to read to you a poem, “To Jesus On His Birthday.” It was written by local poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay. She wrote of Jesus' birth with an edge to her words as she often did in her poetry. And she wrote with a passion for the human condition with all its flaws and frailties, all its longings and desires. We can only wonder what turn of words she might have made of “O Little Town of

Bethlehem,” but she clearly understood that Jesus, the Prince of Peace, has been seldom understood as *he* would have preferred.

“For this your mother sweated in the cold,
For this you bled upon the bitter tree:
A yard of tinsel ribbon bought and sold;
A paper wreath, a day at home for me.
The merry bells ring out, the people kneel;
Up goes the preacher before the crowd;
With voice of honey and with eyes of steel
Droning your humble gospel to the proud.
Nobody listens. Less than the wind that blows
And all your words to us you died to save.
O Prince of Peace! O Sharon’s dewy Rose!
How mute you lie within your vaulted grave.
The stone the angel rolled away with tears
Is back upon your mouth these thousand years.”

The son of a slave who became a champion of the whole human family, a woman of deep and universalist faith, and a poet of the most honest kind have guided our reflections this night as we come to the story of the birth of Jesus as it is told in the Gospel of Luke, in modern day terms.....

There was no place for them in the inn –
Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus.
There was no Motel 6 around.
There were no food stamps to be found.
There was little light in the darkness of the stable.
There was no bed nor even a cradle.
There was only a hope, a dream perhaps,
of something greater to be for all the world to see.
There was a star in the sky guiding the shepherds.
There was an angel who appeared to say,
“Do not be afraid; for see –
I am bringing you good news of great joy for all to proclaim this day.
To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior,

who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign for you:

you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there was with the angel

a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Lk 2:10-14)

May this night find you with peace on your minds, compassion for all people in your hearts, and the fullness of God’s grace and love surrounding you one and all. Let the people say this Christmas eve... “Amen.”

To hold in our prayers this night.....

And hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members....

And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And pray for our President that he might do the right things in coming weeks for the betterment and future of all of us.....

Please hold in your prayers, the family and friends of April DeVarney, a member of our congregation, who died from cancer recently....

And for a friend of mine, Judith, whose husband, Eric, finally left this earth for the wild abandon of God late last night, and for the family and friends of Janet, another friend of mine and devoted Methodist in Sarasota, Florida who also took flight last night into that same wild abandon of God....

And please hold in your prayers, Hank Cary, facing challenging health matters now....

From a Thomaston resident, please pray for Sean for healing, and for James fighting Covid-19,

Also continued prayers for Ed Lee, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine, *Please send me the names of those you would like*

for me to add to this list next Sunday AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.

A Benediction

*May God bless you and keep you.
May God's face radiate upon you
and flood you with grace and tender mercies.
May God smile upon you always
and cover your life with peace.
Amen.*

**Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)
for Sunday, December 27, 2020 – the first Sunday after Christmas**

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148; Luke 2:22-40

Words to ponder on this holy night.....

“Blessed is the season which engages the whole world in a conspiracy of love.”

~ Hamilton Wright Mabie, 1846-1916, essayist, editor