

Christmas Litany¹

Pastor: Who are the children of God?

People: All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God

Pastor: To what does the Spirit of God guide us?

People: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Pastor: How do we know we love the Lord and have faith?

People: What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? If a brother or sister is naked and lack daily food, and one of you says, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Pastor: Let us pray...

All: God all-powerful, grant that we may rid ourselves of the works of darkness, and that we may invest ourselves with the weapons of light in this life to which your Son, Jesus Christ, with great humility came to visit us; so that in the final day, when he returns in majestic glory to judge the living and the dead, we shall rise to eternal life through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.

¹ Based on United Methodist Book of Worship 2011, pp. 280-283

Homily: Christmas past, present and future

“Suzanne Lea suffered a devastating loss when her husband Bryan died of a heart attack. Struggling to cope with the loss and raise two young boys, Matthew and James, the holidays seemed unbearable that year. ‘We didn’t even have a way to hang our Christmas lights without Bryan,’ she said.

One day in December, Suzanne opened her door to find a bowl full of pears. An odd anonymous gift, but one the mom appreciated and believed was from a concerned neighbor. The next day, another anonymous gift landed on the family's doorstep, and then another. It was apparent the 12 Days of Christmas had come to life for Suzanne and her boys. Gifts poured in every day, all based on the favorite Christmas tune, and all serving to heal the loss of a beloved husband, father and friend. She later discovered the gifts came from members of her church.

‘That was huge because when you’re hit with a big tragedy, the darkness is so overwhelming inside of you that it doesn’t let you go,’ Suzanne said. ‘You just want to know that you’re going to have a full life again. That’s what happened on that day. It gave us something to believe in.’

But the giving didn't stop there. Inspired by her community's generous act, Suzanne carried on the tradition herself every Christmas season, giving to those she saw in need. Each year the gifts got bigger and the number of families receiving them grew until Suzanne decided to start her own charity that she named In 12 Days. Her group tries to help people going through hard times. Suzanne's group works with religious organizations, local school boards, sponsors and other charities to spread Christmas cheer each year. It's not just presents Suzanne hopes to share. ‘We’re pulling a whole community together,’ she says.

What Suzanne’s really excited for is the chance to make a difference in the lives of people who really need a Christmas miracle. ‘I’m so proud of what we do,’ she said. ‘In 12 Days is a celebration of life that gives you strength to move forward on your own, through grief.’”²

² <https://www.guideposts.org/comfort-hope/navigating-life-changes/loss/12-days-of-christmas-becomes-real-for-a-family-in-need>

The Lea family’s story is a story shared by many people across the world tonight. There are those in our county who are struggling with the loss of a family member. There are those in our church who are spending Christmas sad and alone, in need of a Christmas miracle. They are in need of renewal and hope.

Like those who’ve suffered a loss, we all need renewal. We need it when the sweetness of the holiday season becomes cloying.... We need it when we just don’t feel like celebrating.... We need it when opening presents doesn’t fill the emptiness we feel inside.... We need it when we hear the message but we’re still afraid of some things in a world that seems callously harsh and uncaring.... We need it when we’re filled with uncertainty and doubt.... We need it when we’re angry because we see a world filled with injustice but we don’t see God doing anything.... We’re waiting for God to reach out and set things right, renewing the world, dispelling the darkness of violence, greed, apathy and oppression with the Light of heaven. Yet too often, we feel like God isn’t paying attention or answering our prayers.

So I have to ask: why are you here tonight? Is it a family tradition to attend the Christmas Eve service, light a candle and sing “Silent Night”? Or did you come because you had a role or an obligation to fulfill? Some of us are here for those reasons and we’re glad you came.

There’s a reason we read the story of Jesus’ birth on Christmas eve. We read it because it IS a tradition. We read it to be reminded of the miracle that happened so long ago, a miracle that fulfilled God’s promises made over millennia. We read the account from Luke to be reminded that God renewed the world and all people by giving us a gift: God’s only Son born as a baby so we would know him and God would be with us. Christ came down and changed the world with love on that Christmas in the distant past. But there’s more than that.

Perhaps you came to church tonight because you’re seeking something else? Did you come hoping to experience God’s presence tonight? Did you come with a heart weary of the world’s empty promises, hoping for God’s touch to relieve you – even if for a moment – of your loneliness or despair?

If you did, you’re in the right place. God’s Spirit fills our sanctuary this evening. I can feel the brush of angels’ wings as they fill this room. Those wings are spread wide around all who are gathered here. And angels’ wings are everywhere protecting those who are in God’s presence tonight, especially in quiet places of prayer where the faithful are alone. We gather together on this special night knowing God’s hand is reaching out to us, ready to touch us and fill us with God’s grace. Christ comes to us and fills us with God’s love in the present Christmas. We’re refreshed and ready to face a new day, filled with God’s love. But there’s more than that.

Maybe you came to church seeking the promise of a better future? We read God’s Word tonight to be renewed in hope. God’s Word is living and active because God is alive and working in our world today. God’s love not only speaks to our hearts, it opens our minds to the power of God’s love in the world. Through love, barriers fall, the lost are found and lives are changed for eternity.

Jesus’ mother, Mary, pondered the miracle of Jesus’ birth and all she experienced in her heart. That’s where she found love and hope so deep and so strong she could stand at the foot of a cross and watch her first born child die and not lose faith. We can be filled with the same love, a love that will overcome all of our suffering, sorrow and grief. It’s because of the source of that love is Jesus Christ, our Redeemer.

We share divine hope and love tonight because of a mother’s faith, a father’s love and the grace of a Lord and Savior who will come to us every Christmas from now to eternity. Christmas past, Christmas present and Christmas future unite when we gather in God’s presence as we do on this very special night.

Open your eyes to God’s glory shining all around us, filling the world with a spirit of peace, love and the promise of things to come. Join the choir of angels around us singing, “Glory to God! Peace to all of God’s children.”

I pray your heart is renewed and refreshed by Christ’s love this Christmas. Amen.

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 (NRSV) – First Reading

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Micah 5:2-5a (NRSV) – Second Reading

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV) – Third Reading

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 2:1-14 (NRSV) – Fourth Reading

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!”

Luke 2:15-20 (NRSV) – Fifth Reading

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.