

December 24, 2016 – Christmas Eve Candlelight Service



"The Magnificent Bewilderment of Stars"

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 2:1-20

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 a 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!" 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.

Have you ever been in a place, out in the country, away from all the city lights, a place so dark at night that you could see all the stars in the sky? Could you see the Milky Way? Could you take it all in, the beautiful wonder of it all, as it's been called: the magnificent bewilderment of stars?

As a child, did you ever try to count them, starting at dusk when the first few appear and trying your best to keep counting until the sky is so full of stars that you realize you'd never be able to count them all? Do you know how many stars there are? No one really knows, of course. One astronomer calculates it this way. He says there are about 10 billion galaxies in the observable universe. And assuming an average of 100 billion stars per galaxy---that adds up to 1 billion trillion stars!

A billion trillion stars! A magnificent bewilderment of stars! Stars poured into the darkness of the night sky through the lavish, exuberant generosity of the Creator.
"And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:
And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so....and God saw that it was good."

"Praise the LORD!" the Psalmist proclaimed.
For it is good to sing praises to our God;
For it is pleasant, and praise is beautiful...
God heals the brokenhearted
And binds up their wounds.
God counts the number of the stars;
and calls them all by name.
Great is our Lord, and mighty in power;
God's understanding is infinite."

Dear friends, we gather in the beauty of this starlit night to give thanks and praise to God, a God so magnificent and awesome in beauty and power as to take our breath away. We come to remember that God is so vast, so beyond all our measurements and counting as to hold the whole universe and all its billion trillion stars within the embrace of healing, holy love. Here in the beauty of this sanctuary, just take a really deep breath and take it all in. Be filled with joy and be filled with the deep happiness that comes not from all our doing and striving but from the very heart of our Creator God who gives us light and life and breath and hope beyond measure. On this night of nights, let heaven and nature sing!

We come this night to be reminded of the BIG picture, the really big picture, of the vast boundless love in which we live and number our days. There is no end, there are no limits to the love of God. A billion trillion stars, every inch and centimeter of this creation, every single child of God is created in love, held in love, nurtured and cherished in love. Nothing and no-one is beyond the reach of God's love. No situation is beyond what our God can redeem and sanctify.

I don't know the real reason why each of you is here tonight. Maybe just because someone in your family said—hey, we're going. If you want to get to open your presents later, you'd better come, too. Or, maybe you're here because you're so full of love and joy that you can't imagine being anywhere else tonight. Or maybe you're here because you're among those the Psalmist called the brokenhearted and the wounded and you've come to find some healing and grace and peace...or, you know, one time a lady told me that she was here because she was driving by and the lights looked so beautiful she just knew she had to come in...

Maybe you're here to hear the angels sing or to see if it's true what they say---that unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. Maybe you're here because you're ready for a new song in your heart, a new dream, a new spark, a new vision, a new beginning.

I grew up in a time when humans were just beginning to explore the heavens, the vast reaches of space. This was the real deal--pre-Star Wars. Astronauts blasted off into space not knowing if everything would work, if the heat shield would protect them on re-entry, if they'd make it back alive. Yet off they went, willing to go because it was important to push beyond the limits of our knowledge and capacity—to learn more, to know more, to understand more....

Just a few weeks ago, the long life of one of those first astronauts, a wonderful man, a great American, came to an end. Astronaut John Glenn, the first American to orbit the earth, was 95. I can remember, as a little girl, that day in 1962 when, as a nation, we held our breath while his little space capsule, Friendship 7, orbited the earth five times, spinning through the billion trillion stars until it finally splashed down into the ocean.

We all loved all the astronauts in those days, especially John Glenn. He became a hero and an inspiration. After the death of this man who'd had such an impact on our nation's history and on countless young lives, I read something he'd said that really struck me: "My view is that to sit back and let fate play its hand out and never try to influence it at all is not the way [we were] meant to operate."

It is my prayer that each of us here this night finds a gift at the manger that comes to each of us in the birth of the Christ Child. That we find a glimmer of a way to give back and to influence this world in a positive way, however big or small that might be. Because the awesome thing about our God is that this God, Creator of the Universe, loves and cherishes each and every one of us, knows us by name, and plants within each of us a purpose and abundant gifts. The Psalmist puts it this way:

O LORD, our God,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.

Tonight, in the birth of Christ, each of us is given a new crown of glory and honor.

For as the great teacher and reformer of the church, Martin Luther, insisted--the angel said... 'Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people; for there is born to you this day a savior, who is Christ the Lord.'

"In these words," Luther said, "you clearly see that [Christ] is born for us. [The angel] does not simply say, Christ is born, but to you he is born..[nor] I bring glad tidings, but to you [I] bring glad tidings of great joy...Therefore...see to it that you make this birth your own and that Christ be born in you."

See to it that you make this birth your own and that Christ be born in you!

From the widest possible scope of all the universes and stars of creation, the love of God finds its focus in the most intimate and personal beam of light that shone over the manger in Bethlehem. From the magnificent bewilderment of stars to the one special star shining bright in the face of the Christ Child, God comes to earth. In the light of that star we see the Light of the World, our Redeemer and Savior. And we see God's promised kingdom of justice and peace, where each and every child shines with the light of purpose and hope, where the woundedness of all people and nations is healed in righteousness.

So now, before we light the Christ Candle to signify the holy birth, and before we light our own candles to show forth the light of Christ shining in us, let us be in silent prayer and reflection for a few moments. Glory in the light—without and within.

Take another deep breath, and breathe in that purpose and that power. Not in an arrogant or prideful way, but in a way that invites God into your heart, into your life, with a renewed sense of your capacity to be made whole, to do good and to make a difference, to influence this world in a positive way, and take your place in God's great kingdom of love and light.

This night--make this birth your own...and let Christ be born in you...

AMEN

Notes:

"The magnificent bewilderment of stars" uttered by Anthony Bourdain, looking at the Montana sky in "Parts Unknown."

Stars statistic from the UCSB Science Line.

Martin Luther. "To You Christ is Born."