

December 24, 2019 • Christmas Eve

“Festival of Lights” 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 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.

Though we always appreciate rain in the Southland, we are grateful for today’s sunshine and the clear skies of this holy night revealing the myriad shining stars that light the heavens. We gather to share our joy, to give thanks to our God, and to affirm, as the Gospel of John puts it, that the true light that enlightens everyone is coming into the world.

We love this Christmas Eve service—with the music of choir, organ and harp, the opportunity to hear the story anew, and the glow of candlelight that makes the darkness bright. Thanks be to God for this holy night and the promise it holds for each and every one of us.

This Christmas we are also blessed with an amazing and generous gift from our friend, the renowned artist John August Swanson. John has graciously shared his serigraph called “Festival of Lights” for our worship in this season. You see it on the cover of our Order of Worship for this holy night. You’ll want to plan now to come back on Sunday, January 12th, for a special time of conversation with John here after morning worship.

John, son of a Mexican mother and Swedish father, is a painter who lives and works here in Los Angeles. He’s been a special friend for many years. His work hangs in some of the world’s most prestigious museums, including the Smithsonian, the Tate Gallery, the Vatican. And you can see his work in our Chapel, in the Fireside Room, and in the narthex as you leave worship tonight you’ll see this very work—“Festival of Lights.” His work, rich in color and detail draws on the folk-art traditions of his parents’ native lands. You’ll want to take time tonight or tomorrow amidst your Christmas festivities, to look closely into his depiction of the starry night, find the animals in the green hills around, and join into the energy, warmth and movement of this procession of people carrying lighted candles, a procession that you’ll see extends all the way into the farthest distance, farther than our eyes can see, filling our hearts with joy and expectation.

John describes “Festival of Lights” as an unending procession of children, gathering from all parts of the world to bring us the light of hope and peace. See, he says, how the brilliant stars in the night sky touch the hills, “almost as if the children are lighting their candles with the light of the stars and bringing us their light.”

It has been said that John’s art helps us see the sacred in the ordinary. Candles, childrens’ faces, animals, green hills, multitudes of stars. And when we allow ourselves to take our place in this luminous procession, we see that we are indeed, each and every one of us, part of God’s amazing gift to the world, the gift of light and love, the gift of promise and peace. And so we come this night, eager to light our own candle, joining the procession to Bethlehem, the city of David, in our hearts.

For it is there that the Christ Child is born. As the Gospel story tells it, Mary and Joseph have had to travel to Bethlehem to be registered for the census in their home town. And though it is near time for her to deliver her first child, they have had to make this difficult journey, arriving amidst hundreds of other families who have come from various places. And when they arrive there are really no accommodations for any of them and they have gathered into what has been described as a large feeding area, adults and children and infants and cows and sheep and donkeys. And it is there that the Christ Child, the promised Messiah, is born. His mother wraps him and swaddling cloths and gently places him in the manger to sleep.

And so we find ourselves amidst this expanse of life, this community of people, ordinary people, people not so different from ourselves, depending on the kindness of strangers and even the hospitality of the animals. And while this multitude is gathering on earth a multitude of the heavenly host, the angels, has gathered in the night sky to make music and proclaim this holy birth. “Fear not,” they sing to the shepherds and to all who will listen. “Fear not, for behold we bring you good news of great joy which is for all the people. To you is born this day in Bethlehem, the city of David, a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Good news, great joy for all the people. Christ is born.

It’s all quite wonderful and astonishing, really. God is putting into motion the transformation of the world and of our hearts and minds. And it’s all here in this story. One baby, yes, whose birth connects us one to another in an unbroken fellowship of love, such as the world has never known, a community, a kinship that knows no lines of difference or exclusion.

Father Gregory Boyle who has worked for decades here in Los Angeles on some of the most difficult challenges we face as a community. Through his Homeboy Industries, he works with gang members and immigrants, inviting them, empowering them to find new life and hope. He also invites us to open our minds and hearts beyond our usual or comfortable categories, taking this notion of kinship as far as it goes. “We [all] belong to each other” he writes, “homeless, immigrant, gang member...there isn’t anybody who doesn’t belong.” In fact, Boyle asserts, “it’s often those who we might think we have the least in common with who are the very ones who teach us the most about kinship and connection and community.”

There is a young man who, over the past several years, worships here from time to time. This community of faith has made him feel welcome and at home when he is here, though day-to-day, he lives on the streets. After a time away, he showed up a few days ago. I was so happy to know that he’s doing OK. I gave him a big hug and welcomed him back. He looked me in the eye, smiled gently, and said simply—as if I of all people should understand: “It’s Christmas.”

Indeed, we’re all part of this beautiful, never-ending, procession of light that embraces all and excludes none. Scripture says it like this: “If we are living and walking in the Light, as God is in the Light, we have unbroken fellowship with one another.”

In a few moments, we will darken the sanctuary to resemble the darkness of the night. And we will light our candles—for safety let me remind you to always hold your lighted candle upright and invite the person next to you to tip their candle into yours to light their own. And as the candlelight spreads to fill this sanctuary in our Festival of Lights, we will take our place in this unbroken fellowship, the never-ending procession of God’s light and love. We will find new life kindled in our own hearts, life made new—this birth, this light, revealing new possibilities for our lives and for the earth and for all the peoples of the world. Good news for all the people.

May Christ, the Light of the World, born this night, fill us with light and love and hope and joy.

Notes:

John August Swanson. Festival of Lights. 2000. Visit johnaugustswanson.com for more information about John and his work.

“A Thrill of Hope: The Christmas Story in Word and Art.” Featuring Candler faculty and the work of John August Swanson. Candler School of Theology at Emory, 2009.

Father Gregory Boyle quoted in the Los Angeles Times, December 18, 2019.