

You Are the Light...
a Christmas Candle Lighting Experience
Wednesday, December 21, 2022



A Beloved Community
Practicing the Possible Through Prayer

Rev. Diana Johnson, with Lucinda Alton, RScP, Chris Johnson, RScP, and musicians Dalton Fitzgerald and Gary French

Call to Awareness – 3 Bells

Opening Prayer – Chris

Rev. Diana

Good evening. We have the privilege of coming together this evening on the Winter Solstice. Solstice is the time when the sun reaches an extreme point in its cycle. There is a moment of pause, and in that pause there is a change of direction. Let us take this Solstice Celebration as an opportunity to pause, and to listen for where in our lives we are being called to change direction.

I invite you to experience our time together from a meditative posture, but also to speak, sing, or applaud as you feel moved. This *is* a celebration, after all, and not a somber event. So settle into whatever makes this time most nurturing for you...eyes open or eyes closed...fully present...breathing...

We look at the stars and wonder...How old is the universe? All we know is that once upon a time or, rather, once before time, the Great Mystery called everything into being in a great breath of creativity—waters, land, green growing things, birds and beasts, and finally human creatures—the beginning, the genesis. In God's good time the universe came into being, opening up from a tiny flower of nothingness to great clouds of hydrogen gas to swirling galaxies. In God's good time came solar systems and planets and ultimately this planet on which we gather on this cold winter evening as the Earth makes its graceful dance around the sun. (Referencing Madeleine L' Engle's Bright Evening Star: Mysteries of the Incarnation)

In ancient times, before written language, there were people all over the planet living in tribal societies. Some of these cultures were nomadic, hunting and gathering their food as they travelled with the seasons. A bit later, some settled and began growing food for their sustenance.

Although these various tribes had little or no contact with one another, they had something in common – they shared a keen awareness of Mother Nature...the weather and the seasons...light and darkness...their lives depended on it. Another thing they

shared in common...they believed in many gods and looked to the gods as they tried to make sense of their world.

Song – *Ancient Mother*, by Robert Gass and On Wings of Song

Rev. Diana

Imagine what you may have experienced...the longest, darkest night of Winter...what we call the Winter Solstice. It has been growing colder for months now, as the days grow shorter, and the sun's warmth becomes a distant memory. If we have pleased the gods, the sun will return...so we create and offer rituals as a prayer for its return. From the beginning of time, we have celebrated the Light.

Solstice Song, written by Jan Garrett & JD Martin

Rev. Diana

Before written language, stories were passed down by word of mouth. The wisdom keepers amongst us painted pictures through song and poetry...used body language to act out their dramas, bringing the power of imagination to their history and legends.

While some of us were using ritual to please the gods, the Shamans and Mystics used it as a way to Commune with the Great Mystery...a progression from ignorance to wisdom was underway...Spiritual Light was being revealed.

Time marches on, human beings all over the planet are evolving and changing...sometimes using war to establish dominance. Then as now, humans had a difficult time accepting and allowing our differences.

The story of the Hanukkah Miracle, told in the 1st book of Maccabees, is a good illustration, and paints a picture of what the Hanukkah celebration is all about. The Jewish people had been exiled and returned to their homeland numerous times, and so they had rooted themselves in rituals and tradition, expressions of *time*, having no *place* to call their own.

Lucinda

Once upon a time, in about 170 BCE, the land of Israel was ruled by a wicked king named Antiochus Epiphanes (An-tie'-oh-kus Eh-pi'-feh-knees). During this time, the Jewish people had many religious celebrations at the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. They considered their Temple to be the holiest of holy places...it was the very center of Jewish life.

But King Antiochus did not want to rule over a nation of many religions and many cultures; he wanted to rule one nation with one religion and one culture. He wanted everyone to live the way he lived and to pray the way he prayed, according to *Greek* customs. He completely abolished the practices of Judaism. He forbade the Jews to celebrate Shabbat (Shah-baht') or observe their festivals. He made it illegal for them to read or study Torah (Tor-ah'), or to worship in the Temple, and he set up idols and altars to Greek gods inside.

Many Jews were afraid for their lives, so they followed the king's orders. But one group of brave souls...the Maccabees (Mack'-uh-bees)...decided they would not submit to the king. They would not worship foreign gods or give up their way of life. They were determined to take back their Temple and defend their religious freedom.

Compared with the King's army, they were small in number, but they were mighty in spirit. With faith and relentless determination as their guides, against all odds, the Maccabees won a stunning victory over the King's army. They took back their Temple but were heartbroken to discover that their holy space had been desecrated. They lovingly cleaned and purified every inch of the Temple, removing the foreign idols and altars the king had set up inside. And then, on the 25th day of the month of Kislev (Kiss'-lev), the Maccabees held a glorious rededication ceremony.

The word "Hanukkah" means "dedication," and it comes from the moment when the Temple was triumphantly returned to the Jewish people. The story is told that when the Maccabees walked into the Temple, they found only enough oil to light the Menorah (Meh-nor'-uh) for one day – but miraculously, that small amount of oil lasted for eight days, which is exactly how long it took to replenish their supply. Today, the celebration of the Jewish Season of Light lasts eight days, in honor of the miracles that occurred so many years ago.

The modern message from the Jewish people to the world is this: we must always work to find light in the darkness, and we must always work to keep the light of religious freedom burning for all people, for all time. **We** are the Children of Light.

Song – *Children of Light*, written by Diana Johnson

Rev. Diana

Tonight is the fourth night of Hanukkah. What else does Holy Celebration have to offer us, we who may or may not be Jewish? On a community or global level this festival might symbolize faith in the ever-presence of God's Abundance. Let the celebration of Hanukkah remind us that our needs are always met; our deepest prayerful knowing is that all beings have plenty.

This miracle of Light also speaks to us on a personal level. It invites us to shine the Light of Spirit into the dark places, in ourselves and in our world, when we think we cannot...when there seems not enough.

This miracle symbolizes a faith that is steadfast in times of apparent lack or difficulty. It represents the ever-present Light of God, self-existent, eternal...shining always...within you...within me...

Now in the Ancient Hebrew tradition, there was a prophecy that a Messiah would come, fully God, fully man...

Song – *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, traditional Advent Chant

Rev. Diana

Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel...Emmanuel means "God with us."

The next line...To ransom captive Israel...

On the literal, historical level...To release the Jewish people from captivity...

On the metaphysical level...someone would come to serve as an example of how to live from our Divinity, in Love...AS Love.

By tracing our story from the earliest known times, through the story of the Hanukkah Miracle in 167 BC, and onto the Christmas Story, we can see the progression and evolution of the Jewish faith, and of the human condition. Here is a loose telling of the story from the book of Matthew, written in roughly 85 CE.

Chris

This is how the birth of Jesus came about: His mother, Mary, was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But as he was considering, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet...that the virgin would conceive and give birth to a son, and he would be called *Immanuel*. When Joseph woke up, he took Mary as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

King Herod heard this and was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. He called together the chief priests and teachers of the law and asked them where the Messiah was to be born. *In Bethlehem*, they replied, according to the prophecy.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and asked when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

The Magi went on their way and followed the star they had seen all the way to the place where the child was. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Song – *Mary, Did You Know?* written by Mark Lowry & Buddy Greene

Rev. Diana

The Gospel According to Luke was written in roughly the same time. Here is the same story, this time from the second chapter of Luke, the one we are most familiar with.

The Emperor Caesar Augustus made a decree that the people should be taxed and would need to pay that tax in the city where they were born. Joseph went up from Galilee and into Bethlehem, with Mary his espoused wife, who was ‘great with child’.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver the baby. “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.”

“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly hosts praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, ‘Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.’”

“And they came with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the babe, lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.”

“But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

Song – *Ave Maria*, written by Franz Schubert

Rev. Diana

Here is what scholars tell us...many Pagan practices were absorbed into the new Christmas festival...the evergreen, a symbol of eternal life...mistletoe, associated with fertility. And what about the many lights that we painstakingly hang every December? What of the Light?

Well, you may recall that on the night Jesus was born, there was a bright star in the sky, guiding the shepherds and the wise men to the stable, or so the books of Matthew and Luke tell us.

Part of the Christian symbolism of light at this darkest time of year has always meant living in God's Light. In our modern day, we might gain insight by looking at this story through the lens of metaphor...I believe that as humankind evolves, we move from a purely physical, to a psychological, to a spiritual understanding grounded in mystical experience.

So, how might we hear this Christmas story in a new way, a way that is relevant to our lives in 2023...a way that helps us to raise ourselves from challenging conditions when necessary...that helps us to see the Divine in ourselves and others?

Remember that Mary was at choice as to whether or not to bring forth this child. She said Yes. "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Is there a place in your life where the Divine Urge, an inner prompting, is inviting you to take some action, to step into a larger experience of life? Have you said Yes? Will you *Let It Be*?

Song – *Let It Be*, written by Paul McCartney & John Lennon

Rev. Diana

From Fr. Richard Rohr: "We see in the original Gospel stories of Jesus' birth that there's really nothing pretty about the first Christmas. The only way human beings can understand spiritual things is that they have to be presented in physical, material form. We can't get it otherwise.

We have to see it and we have to touch it. *How* God comes into the world would also seem to be very important, as if to say to us: this is where God is to be found. The great question has always been, "What is God? Who is God? Where is this God hiding?" because initially, God isn't really obvious to most people. The mystery we celebrate at Christmas is saying that the divine has chosen its hiding place in the world, and it's in *all* material things. And that *all* becomes summed up now in the body of Jesus."

"Where is this God being revealed? Not in the safe world, but at the edge, at the bottom, among those where we don't want to find God, where we don't look for God, where we don't expect God. The way we've created Christianity (or, indeed, spirituality in general), it seems like it's all about being nice, pretty, middle class, "normal" and under the law.

Here we have in the Gospel stories Jesus, Mary, and Joseph being none of those things. It might just be telling us we should be looking elsewhere.”

I would like to suggest some additional symbolism, and to offer a few more questions for you to ponder as you move into the remaining days of this Season of Light...questions that may speak to your heart.

Could it be that Mary represents a state of purity in mind and heart? Might I experience a deeper Spiritual Wisdom and Knowing, Power, Strength, Courage, and Love... the birth of Christ Consciousness in me...by keeping my mind and heart pure?

How might my experience of life change if, like the wise men and shepherds, I were to keep my focused attention on the Light...my thoughts, words, and actions reflecting the Divinity that I Am...in the image and likeness of the One...moving ever closer to the Truth of my being?

What if I, like Mary and Joseph, made my journey through life with patience, presence, determination, humility, gratitude, and faith?

What if I practiced trusting, knowing, that my *heart's deepest desires* are in fact God seeking to express Itself through me?

What if the shepherds, quietly following the guidance of the stars, are there to remind me to be humble...to look for Divine Guidance and to follow it always?

What if the birth in a stable was meant to remind me that my greatest inspiration can come from the most commonplace of experiences...that God is absolutely everywhere...and that it's not about the stuff?

What if the shepherds and the wise men represent the heart and the mind, the feeling, and the intellect?

What if they are there to remind me that the intellect and the heart, in perfect balance, work together in my journey to know God? One looks to find God in the world...the other looks to find God within.

What if God, in order to lead me to my own Divinity, came as a newborn child because...well, let's be honest here...nothing demands more time, attention, and focus than a newborn infant. And nothing demands more of my *attention* and *intention* than uncovering the Perfection and Wholeness that lie within me.

And what if this story is telling me that in order to discover and live *from* and *as* my Divine Wisdom, I must practice constant and unwavering Love and Devotion...that my Spiritual life *must* come first?

Song – *Ancient Drum*, written by Diana & Chris Johnson

Rev .Diana – Closing & Prayer

Jesus was both human and Divine...a great teacher, evolutionary, and revolutionary. His powerful message was for the common people, for all people...that when we live from

Love and Compassion, we are expressing our Divinity, in the image and likeness of the Creator. His spirit lives on in our hearts and minds, in the Collective Consciousness, and his example continues to guide us.

We join our hearts in prayer...

There is only One eternal Light, One Consciousness, One Intelligence, One Power... I call It God...God Within, God Without...It is the All-In-All...It is the Divine Spark that brings Life into being. I Am that Light; *You* are that Light. All that exists, at its very core, is Light. I know that the Light of the Christ is inherent in all beings, in all of Creation, no matter the appearance...we need only let it shine...

And so we do...through the deep cracks left behind by every heartbreak and loss, by every time we were hurt or hurt another...we let that Light shine. We say Yes to the gifts of Spirit...the Divine Qualities that are already given...Love, Life, Peace, Presence, Beauty, Joy, Abundance, Freedom...acknowledging the Light of the Christ, in full Faith that it is present within *me*...in full Faith that it is born in form and experience in our world, here and now.

For this I give deep and profound thanks, honoring and celebrating the Light, releasing, accepting, embodying, and radiating the Light of the One...And so it is. And so it shall ever be. Amen!

Rev. Diana – Offertory

It has become tradition to offer gifts to friends and family during this holy-day season. We take a moment now to offer you the opportunity to share of your financial good, should you choose to, in support of the Work we are doing in the world.

If you are viewing the service from home on Christmas morning, you can go to our website, mysticheart.org, to find our Donate Button or mailing address. We truly appreciate your generosity. It ensures a prosperous start to the New Year and assists us in growing this powerful Work. We know that God is the Source of all Good, and that It flows through your generous hearts and hands.

Offertory Song – *Oh, Holy Night*, written by Adolphe Adam

Lucinda – Prayer of Gratitude for the Offering

Rev. Diana & Practitioners – Candle Lighting Ceremony,

Within apparent darkness, there is always a ray of Light. So that we might enter the New Year with our hearts, minds, and gaze set on that Light, we light these candles. As we begin, let your eyes gently close for a moment if you are comfortable doing so. Call to mind something in your life, or in the world, that is calling to have its Light revealed...that is awaiting the return of Wholeness. Maybe it is a personal healing...or maybe it is a global challenge, or something else.

Know with me that the act of lighting your candle this evening is a symbol for your intention...to shine your Light in the world. It is a reminder that wherever you shine your Divine Light, Wholeness is revealed.

And may it remind each of us that, no matter the appearance, the world is alight with blessings for those who will see.

We will begin with the back of the room. One row at a time, come to the front. If you reserved your seat tonight, you will find a candle with your name on it...otherwise choose a candle addressing *Beloved*...and turn toward Lucinda or Chris...allow them to bless you by sharing the Light of the Christ. Then you will carry that Light with you as you return to your seat. When everyone has a candle, we will close the evening by joining our hearts and our voices with Silent Night.

(Recorded Music during Candle Lighting by Kenny G)

Congregation – *Silent Night / May Peace Prevail*, written by Franz Gruber & Chris Johnson

Rev. Diana – Metta Prayer

In honor of the Buddhist tradition, which also celebrated the Light this month, by way of the enlightenment of the Buddha, I offer the Metta: *May all beings be happy; may all beings be well; may all beings be safe; may all beings be peaceful and at ease.*

May you and yours enjoy every blessing this Holy-Day Season. Please feel free to take your candles home as a gift this evening, a reminder that You Are, and have always been, the *Light*.