

Order of Service
A Visit from Mrs. Claus
Sunday, December 21, 2008

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

We gather in the chill of winter solstice,
Finding warmth from each other,
Nourishing hope where reason fails.
Grateful for small miracles, we rejoice
In the wonder of light and darkness
And the daring of hope.
Holy One of Blessing
Your Presence
Fills creation.
Let us celebrate together.

Prayer for Peace

Blanketed by snow
The noisesome world is hushed.
We gaze upon the sparking beauty of this frozen time,
But we do not stay long in the cold.
This time of year we withdraw into interior places,
Like the warmth of a fire in the hearth,
Or a cup of tea with a friend.
We come into the warmth of the heart
Noticing its peace, its joy, and its love.
We come to a place deep inside
To the rhythm that is our life.

Sense now the beating of your heart within you.

Reading "The Work of Christmas," by Howard Thurman

When the song of angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among the brothers and sisters,
To make music in the heart.

* **Carol #231 "Angels We Have Heard on High"**

Reading "And It Came to Pass," Book of Luke

And it came to pass in those days
That there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus
That all the world should be taxed.
And Joseph also went up from Galilee
Unto the city of David which is called Bethlehem,
To be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife,
Being great with child.
And so it was, that, while they were there,
The days were accomplished that she should be delivered.
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.

*** Carol #245 "Joy to the World"**

Reading "The Feast of Lights," by Emma Lazarus

Kindle the taper like the steadfast star
Ablaze on evening's forehead o'er the earth,
And add each night a luster till afar
An eightfold splendor shine above thy hearth.
Clash, Israel, the cymbals, touch the lyre,
Blow the brass trumpet and the harsh-tongued horn;
Chant psalms of victory till the heart take fire,
The Maccabean spirit leap new born.

Homily "By Horse or Train, It's Still Walla Walla," Rev.
Davis (1962)

Long ago, a wise old sage in the village of Ching Do in central China let it be known that at the time of the New Year Celebration he would share a great secret about the spiritual journey. He sent his disciples far and wide to find seekers on the path of wisdom who would be worthy of this great secret. Hearing the good news, four persons, each from a different corner of that vast land, decided to visit the old sage at the time of the New Year, to find out what his great secret might be.

One of these seekers rented two donkeys from a farmer in his region in the far north of China. He rode one donkey one day, then the second donkey on the second day, alternating his use of the beasts so that they could make the long journey to Ching Do without becoming exhausted. He chose roads that the donkeys could travel in their slow, measured pace, making small progress every day toward his destination.

Another of these seekers from the far south of China only heard about the sharing of the great secret a month before the time of the New Year Celebration. He packed lightly, bought a strong horse and traveled the high roads, passing swiftly over the thousand-mile journey to his destination.

The third seeker from the West of China was himself old, and his joints were inflamed with the wear and tear of a hard life. He could not ride a beast for many days at a time, but he was fortunate. His brother had a bull and cart, which

he used in the harvest season to take grain to the market. He borrowed the bull and cart, placed pillows on the hard wood, and rested comfortably throughout his journey to Ching Do.

The fourth seeker from the far East of China had no means and no wealthy friends. If he should travel to Ching Do, it would be on his two feet alone. And so, uncertain that he would ever get there, he began the long journey on foot. With him he carried three pairs of shoes, lest they wear out along the way. Walking slowly as he did, he saw many beautiful sights and met many wonderful people along the road.

When finally it was the time of the New Year, the four travelers happened to meet where their roads joined just outside the village of Ching Do. Each traveler had come to depend on his own means of travel, and asserted its merits to the other three. The donkey rider claimed that his use of two animals was the most humane way to travel. The horseman told them all that a fast horse was best because it was most efficient. The one who took the bull and cart explained that his journey was by far the most comfortable. The one who took his time, walking, said that he saw so much more and met so many more people along the way. Soon the conversation became a debate and the debate became a verbal battle. When they arrived together at the hut of the wise man, they were near to blows.

Finally, sitting before the old sage, they quieted down enough to listen to what the great secret might be.

“You bicker about your means of getting here,” the old man said, “but your *vehicle* is not your *destination*. Ching Do is Ching Do. The *means* of your travel is not what you travel for. The *form* of your seeking is not the *goal* of your seeking. *How* you seek is not *what* you seek. And this is my secret for you. Be *here* now in Ching Do for the Celebration of this New Year.”

There is something remarkable, something essential, about this holiday time of year. From ancient times and in diverse cultures the human family has come to this time to celebrate, to heal and to begin anew.

Over the millennia, this end-of-year time has been observed through distinct religious and cultural traditions. Each tradition asserts its own truth claim. Each tradition pretends it's better than the other. And yet, as with the seekers traveling to Ching Do, the traditions are really only vehicles.

There is something special for us in this time of year, and it doesn't matter what words or what traditions we choose. What matters is finding the unique vehicles that work for us and that bring us our own best appreciation of the season.

The season is not Christmas, nor Kwanza, nor Hanukkah, nor Winter Solstice. These are the vehicles that bring us *to* this time. These are the languages through which we manifest the special-ness of this time. Within these traditions are the symbols that we use to hold on to this time. But they are not in themselves this special time.

I saw a Christian televangelist recently praying to his TV flock. He said, "God, it's about time you do away with Allah and Buddha and Hindu and all those other gods." It was as if he were imagining a Wrestle-Mania of the gods, let the best one prevail. Clearly he believed that the God of the Muslim and the God of the Hindu was not the same God as his own. When we assert the superiority of our own tradition, we are like the Chinese seekers, mistaking the vehicle for the destination.

I invite you to the plurality of traditions this holiday season. Embrace what has been good for you and yours in past years, but also explore some new vehicles to the truth of the season. There's an old Irish saying, "No one path leads all the way there." On the road to your truth in this holiday time, your journey will be enriched by exploring many paths and trying many vehicles. Find what works for you, but don't stop there. Keep looking. And you will come ever more deeply, ever more abundantly into this special, holy time of year.

May it be so.