

CHRISTMAS EVE 2013  
9:30 pm service

*The Story of Christmas in Lessons and Music*

**First Lesson** – Thomas Stumpf

Our first lesson is selected from the book of Isaiah and the book of Luke.

From Isaiah:

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, Prince of Peace.

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.

From Luke:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of  
death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

Here ends the reading.

## **Second Lesson** - Reverend Claire Feingold Thoryn

Our second lesson is from the book of Luke, and a selection from Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations on Immortality."

From Luke:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 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 swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

From Wordsworth:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

Here ends the reading.

### **Third Lesson - Thomas Stumpf**

Our third lesson is from the book of Luke and the book of Hebrews.

From Luke:

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, 'Fear not; for behold - I bring you good tidings of great joy: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes 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, goodwill, to all!'

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

From Hebrews:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Here ends the reading.

## Fourth Lesson - "The Winter of Listening" by David Whyte

No one but me by the fire,  
my hands burning  
red in the palms while  
the night wind carries  
everything away outside.

All this petty worry  
while the great cloak  
of the sky grows dark  
and intense  
round every living thing.

What is precious  
inside us does not  
care to be known  
by the mind  
in ways that diminish  
its presence.

What we strive for  
in perfection  
is not what turns us  
into the lit angel  
we desire,

what disturbs  
and then nourishes  
has everything  
we need.

What we hate  
in ourselves  
is what we cannot know

in ourselves but  
what is true to the pattern  
does not need  
to be explained.

Inside everyone  
is a great shout of joy  
waiting to be born.

Even with the summer  
so far off  
I feel it grown in me  
now and ready  
to arrive in the world.

All those years  
listening to those  
who had  
nothing to say.

All those years  
forgetting  
how everything  
has its own voice  
to make  
itself heard.

All those years  
forgetting  
how easily  
you can belong  
to everything  
simply by listening.

And the slow

difficulty  
of remembering  
how everything  
is born from  
an opposite  
and miraculous  
otherness.  
Silence and winter  
has led me to that  
otherness.

So let this winter  
of listening  
be enough  
for the new life  
I must call my own.

### **Homily: A Great Shout of Joy**

Inside everyone  
is a great shout of joy  
waiting to be born.

I remember a night sky in winter. It was dark grey-orange-pink, the way the sky near Philadelphia always is. Even miles away, the light from the city is always bleeding into the darkness. I was walking on a path, towards a long row of trees, tall proud old oaks that were marching downhill, perpendicular to my path. And they were empty of everything except, of course, their thousands of branches. The branches were moving, violent and beautiful, in the fast-moving air way up above my head. The night was both very quiet and very loud, no other sound but the wind and those branches. The city shone in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it; and neither could the stars.

I don't remember what had happened that day, but I remember how I felt at that moment. I was nursing a wound in my heart. It felt like a stone in my belly, a frown, something gnawing and whining in my ribcage. It may have been a broken heart, because that was a pretty constant feeling in my early 20s. Perhaps you have been there.

Or that wounded gnawing feeling may have been disappointment, or disillusionment, or just the sheer existential crisis that comes when you are on the brink of true adulthood and you still aren't quite sure who you are and how the world works and you haven't yet realized that *no one* really knows who they are and how the world works, and so you are stuck there with your unknowing, feeling as though you are the only one confused and alone in the dark, in that pink-grey dark.

All this petty worry  
while the great cloak  
of the sky grows dark  
and intense  
round every living thing.

There was the wind and the branches and light from the city and the darkness all around and the empty place inside and I stopped walking and turned my neck and face all the way up to those 60 foot tall trees. And I felt God.

everything  
has its own voice  
to make  
itself heard.

What I mean is, in that moment, I felt a great thrill of hope. A shout of joy so loud that it was absolutely silent. I belonged to everything. I was a part of the miraculous otherness.

And then I put my face back to the path before me and kept walking. Into the unknowing. With the grey pink darkness ahead and behind me.

what disturbs  
and then nourishes  
has everything  
we need.

Have you walked in darkness? Have you seen a great light?

When Jesus was born the world was dark, completely dark.

There were no cities, as we know them, filled with people keeping their light on late into the night, their faces lit with the refusal to sleep, the refusal to lie silent in the dark and listen.

There was no electric light.

And so the sky was dark, not grey-pink dark, but black, and filled with stars.

Sometimes what we need is not a light in the darkness, but for the darkness to remind us what light really means.

In this night, this true blackness that shone with starlight, traveled a man and a woman so young that if she was here today we would probably say she was not yet old enough to babysit.

They traveled because they had to, not because they wanted to. They traveled because their Emperor had demanded it and they were powerless to refuse.

All those years  
listening to those

who had  
nothing to say.

In those days, the Emperor—Caesar—the King of Kings—was not only the highest human. He was believed to be God. The son of God. The Emperor had the army, the horses, the silk robes, the servants, the weapons, all the power. The poor could not look upon his face. The Emperor was “God,” and God ate his fill.

I guess that is the problem with so many people using that nickname, God. It’s like if you knew two friends named Sarah. And one Sarah was lovely and kind, when she listened she just listened and didn’t tell you what to do, and when she spoke you were always surprised by how gently and uncomfortably honest she was. And the other Sarah was mean and held a grudge and had a lot of little rules that you never could seem to remember and she always let you know that she had other friends she liked better.

How confusing that we can call such different people the same name. How confusing that we can call such different beliefs in the Holy by the same name.

So the Emperor was one kind of Sarah, one kind of “God.” And then along came the other. The miraculous other. The baby.

He was born with no army, no horses, no silk robes, no servants, no weapons, and no power. But he was not in utter nakedness, for he was trailing clouds of glory.

And at the birth there was that brief and never-ending moment of silence, that heart-stopping moment when the world could have been very, very different. And then, in the darkness, they heard his weak, infant cry.

All those years  
forgetting  
how everything  
has its own voice  
to make  
itself heard.

He was not perfect. I bet he still made Mary scream with pain and fear as she labored. I bet he did not sleep through the night. I bet he soiled his swaddling clothes and I would bet anything that his first word was “No!”

He was not perfect. As he grew older, we know that he got angry. We know he was perpetually disobedient. We know he made friends with a rough crowd. We know that he talked back to his Mother. We know that he questioned his Father.

What we strive for  
in perfection  
is not what turns us  
into the lit angel  
we desire.

He was not perfect. He was not powerful. He was just a human baby, who grew into a man whose raised his one small voice against the heavy hand of oppression. And yet here we are, in the dark, each of us carrying a small inextinguishable light, remembering him.

I bet your birth made your mother cry. I bet you did not sleep through the night. I bet you have made messes that you didn't clean up. I know that you have been angry. Me too. Me too. We are not perfect.

And, and. And still God dwells within each one of us. And this time I use that nickname to talk about the good God, the God I believe in. The God who is Love, the God who listens, the God who disturbs and then, nourishes.

Divinity is born from imperfection. Humanity can be holy. We are all sons and daughters of God.

everything  
is born from  
an opposite  
and miraculous  
otherness.

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.

Walk forward into the unknowing, into the night. You are not alone.

you can belong  
to everything  
simply by listening.

Listen. Look up. Let your heart break open.

Inside everyone  
is a great shout of joy  
waiting to be born.

*Amen.*