

CHRISTMAS EVE MEDITATION 2013

Tonight, on Christmas Eve, we lit the last of our advent candles, the Christ candle in the center of our Advent wreath. Through the four weeks of Advent, our Advent wreath has become increasingly ablaze with light, from the tenuous flame of the first purple candle to the fullness of the flame of the wreath as it stands tonight. In a few short moments the flame from that Christ candle will spread throughout the church, filling our sanctuary, and hopefully our hearts, with its soft yet brilliant light.

Filling our sanctuary--and hopefully our hearts. The light of the Christ candle in our Advent wreath--and the light of Christ within our hearts. The birth of Jesus of Nazareth in the little town of Bethlehem 2000 years ago--and the birth of the Christ child within each of us this evening.

Angelus Silesius, the 12th century German mystic, calls our attention to these two dimensions of Christmas: the first and the second birth, the first and the second coming, when he says,

*Though Christ a thousand times
In Bethlehem be born,
If he's not born in you
Your soul is still forlorn.
The cross on Golgotha
Will never save your soul;
The cross in your own heart
Alone can make you whole.*

Angelus Silesius tells us that the cross on which Jesus of Nazareth died finds its parallel in the cross upon which we offer up our sinful pride, the egocentrism that separates us from God and from each other. The cross that Jesus carried up the Via Dolorosa finds its parallel in the crosses we bear, the burdens we carry in our daily life.

With regard to Christmas, Angelus Silesius tells us that it is not the outer historical event of Jesus' birth that will change our lives. Our lives will only change if the spirit of Jesus as the

living Christ is born in us. If this does not happen, though we say we believe in the Incarnation, in the event of God become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, our soul will not be touched. For our soul to be transformed, the Christ has to become incarnate, become a living reality in our daily lives.

As we note in the lighting of the our Advent candles, Advent is a time to prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth. It is also a time to open our hearts to the birth of Christ as a spiritual experience. It invites us to become like Mary, an ordinary, everyday person like us, who made a place for Jesus within her womb and also within her heart. It invites us, like Mary, to let the Logos, the Word of God, become incarnate in us and then enter the world through us.

Mary provided a place for Jesus in her womb. She also provided a place for Jesus in her home. She fed him and nurtured him both physically and spiritually. She taught him and guided his steps. She helped him to grow into the person that God wanted him to be, the person that God called him to be. We, too, need to nurture this new life that would burst forth within us.

Angelus Silesius goes on to tell us,

*If you hope to give birth to God on earth, remember:
Conception takes place in the heart, the womb of the Eternal.*

If we can open our hearts to God and to each other, if we can be as receptive as Mary was, the Christ child will be born in us. Angelus Silesius tells us that it is this that will transform our soul, not what Mary did so many years ago.

What a beautiful thought on Christmas Eve--the realization that we can be the womb of God just as Mary was the womb of God so many years ago, the realization that that God not only became incarnate in the world of space and time in Jesus of Nazareth, God can become incarnate in the world of space and time through us. This can happen; we can become the womb of God, if we open our hearts to Christ.

It was a special moment in history when God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth 2000 years ago, but that is nothing compared to what can happen to us tonight, or tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow if we open our hearts to Christ.

The Christmas poem that best expresses this profound truth, that captures the connection between the first and the second birth, the first and the second coming, between the crucifixion and the entry of the Holy Spirit into our hearts, and thus captures the true spirit of Christmas, was written by the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti in the 1950's. It is one of my favorite Christmas poems. It is entitled "Christ Climbed Down."

*Christ climbed down
from his bare Tree
this year
and ran away to where
there were no rootless Christmas trees
hung with candycanes and breakable stars*

*Christ climbed down
from his bare Tree
this year
and ran away to where
there were no gilded Christmas trees
and no tinsel Christmas trees
and no tinfoil Christmas trees
and no pink plastic Christmas trees
and no gold Christmas trees
and no black Christmas trees
and no powderblue Christmas trees
hung with electric candles
and encircled by tin electric trains
and clever cornball relatives*

*Christ climbed down
from his bare Tree
this year
and ran away to where
no intrepid Bible salesmen
covered the territory
in two-tone cadillacs
and where no Sears Roebuck crèches
complete with plastic babe in manger*

*arrived by parcel post
the babe by special delivery
and where no televised Wise Men
praised the Lord Calvert Whiskey*

*Christ climbed down
from his bare Tree
this year
and ran away to where
no fat handshaking stranger
in a red flannel suit
and a fake white beard
went around passing himself off
as some sort of North Pole saint
crossing the desert to Bethlehem
Pennsylvania
in a Volkswagen sled
drawn by rollicking Adirondack reindeer
with German names
and bearing sacks of Humble Gifts
from Saks Fifth Avenue
for everybody's imagined Christ child*

*Christ climbed down
from his bare Tree
this year
and ran away to where
no Bing Crosby carollers
groaned of a tight Christmas
and where no Radio City angels
iceskated wingless
thru a winter wonderland
into a jinglebell heaven
daily at 8:30
with Midnight Mass matinees*

*Christ climbed down
from his bare Tree
this year*

*and softly stole away into
some anonymous Mary's womb again
where in the darkest night
of everybody's anonymous soul
He awaits again
an unimaginable
and impossibly
Immaculate Reconciliation
the very craziest of
Second Comings*

My prayer for us this evening is that, like Mary, we can become the womb of the Eternal, that the Christ child will be born in us today, and that the birth of the Christ child within our hearts will transform our lives and transform our world just as it did hers so many years ago. If this can happen to us, we will know the true meaning of Christmas.

*A meditation offered by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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