

Worship – December 23, 2018: Service of Lessons, Carols & Stories

Presentation of Theme:

One thing that unites us, no matter our age, nationality, or background, is a love for stories. Children go to grown-ups and ask to be told or read a story. At family gatherings or reunions, most of the time is spent either in eating or story-telling. We are a people of stories.

In a recent essay, the Nigerian writer Chigozie Obioma told about how his father used to always tell him stories when he was sick. It was something he remembered with great joy. He also recalled the day when he went to his busy father and asked to be told a story, even though he wasn't sick. His father laughed and asked how old he was. The boy answered, "Eight." The father knew his son could now read, so he handed him a book of Igbo legends and told Chigozie to go read the stories for himself. Soon the boy was reading everything. So the parents took him to the local library where he saw more books than he imagined could exist in the world. Breathlessly he went up to the counter to get a library card, and saw a librarian smiling at him who said, "Ah, this is good. Reading is like finding light, you know. And Jesus said a light cannot be hidden under a bushel." As she handed over the small square yellow library card, the woman repeated to the father, "Your son has found the light under the bushel."

This time of year we tell over and over the same story – the birth of Jesus as described in Luke's gospel. It never grows old, and it continues to shine light on our lives today. In this worship service we will hear words of scripture that highlight aspects of the Christmas story – as well as listen to a creative re-telling of the Christmas story as done by the author Jeanette Winterson in her short story, "The Lion, the Unicorn, and me." It is a description of the Christmas story from the perspective of a donkey present in the stable on that special day long ago.

*But before we start with our time of music and stories, we need to gather together. And what better way to gather than to welcome new friends into our fellowship. Let us welcome our newest members today.
(RECEPTION OF NEW MEMBERS)*

CHAPTER 1: The Chosen One

(Randy) Before it happened, an angel lined up all the animals – every one, of every kind, because this angel had the full list left over from the ark. Most were eliminated at once – spiders, monkeys, bears, walruses, snakes. Dogs and cats were too small, the hippopotamus too wayward. The camel was wanted elsewhere, as were the cattle. After a long time, it was just the three of us: the lion, the unicorn, and me.

[Click here to continue reading the story at Jeanette Winterson's website.](#)

SCRIPTURE: (PATRICE) – Isaiah 9:2-7

²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

HYMN: “Savior of the Nations, Come” (vs. 1,4)

Chapter 2: A Stable for the Night

The musty, fusty, little town was quite busy. Everyone here to pay up their taxes; everyone having to be put up for this one night, so that even the mice were renting their mouse-holes, and there were travelers hanging out of birds' nests, and the beehives had three families apiece, and a man tapping on the frozen lake asking the fish to let him in. Every bed and every under-the-bed, and every ledge, nook, shelf, cranny, gap, cupboard and cart squeezed and popped with arms and legs.

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SCRIPTURE (Heather): Micah 5:2-5

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name

of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; ⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

Hymn 108: "Of the Father's Love Begotten" (vs. 1,4)

Chapter 3: The Commotion of Birth

When I was unsaddled of my burdens, Joseph turned me out into the yard to eat my supper. It was cold, sharp, biting weather. "Something will happen tonight," said the ox. "I can feel it in my shoulders." "I can smell it," said the dog. "It's quivering my whiskers," said the cat. I carried on eating because I was hungry. Eating as only an ass can eat, I suddenly saw the light flash across my hooves, changing from grey to bright the turned-over, trampled and frosted clods of earth around the stable. I looked up; the back of the inn was ramshackle and dark, but the stable was now shining. Two creatures in bright array were sitting on the clay tiles of the roof ridge, their feet clean and bare, their hair flowing like a fast river, and each carried a long trumpet slung across their back.

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SCRIPTURE: (Patrice) Isaiah 11:1-9

11A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The 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. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The 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. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Hymn "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates"
MOMENTS WITH THE CHILDREN (Heather)

Chapter 4: The Donkey's Song

It was life, bloody and raw, wet and steaming in the cold like our breath, and the Baby, its face screwed up and its eyes closed, and Joseph's hand bigger than its back, and suddenly there was the blast of trumpets, and the

front blew clean off the stable. I looked up and saw the angels' feet pushed through the sagging roof and their bodies taut on the ridge-line, heralding the beginning of something, the end of something. I tipped back my head and I brayed and brayed to join the trumpets. My nose was so high and the roof so low that the angel's foot brushed me as I sang.

[Click here to continue reading.](#)

SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:1-7 (Heather)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

Luke 2:8-14 (Patrice)

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

Hymn: "Love Has Come"

(Patrice) Call for Offering/Offertory (Gentle Mary Laid Her Child/It Came Upon a Midnight Clear)/Doxology

(Heather) Prayer of Thanksgiving

Chapter 5: Departures into an Uneasy Night

(RANDY) Sometime in the night, the lion on soft paws crept in and bowed his head. Sometime in the night, through a gap in the wall, the unicorn touched the baby with his horn. When morning came, a stretching, yawning, sniffing, snorting sort of morning, I trotted round to the front of the inn. Two men sleeping behind flowers on the porch looked up and said, "Look at that donkey's nose! What's he been eating?" I squinted down the velvety barrel of my nose, but I couldn't see anything strange.

[Click here to continue reading.](#)

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 2:1-6 (Heather)

²In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Matthew 2:7-12 (Patrice)

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

(RANDY) PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION:

Holy God, we gather up the prayers of this community and those we love, presenting our intercessions for the church, the world and all in need. We pray in the name of the One who transforms principalities and powers and renews the heavens and the earth, Christ our Savior.

We pray for the church – for our siblings in Christ who gather as we do all over the world in house churches and storefronts, on reservations, in townships and villages, among immigrants, in hospital chapels and prisons – wherever the church can be found on frontiers of mission and service, empower its witness to strengthen and comfort your people.

We pray for the earth and all creatures – for the healing and well-being of all you have given us, for water and air, soil and stars, for creatures in the seas and skies, swamps and savannahs. Show us their beauty and remind us of our mutual need for one another.

We pray for an end to violence, oppression and injustice. We pray for all peacemakers, for those who power to hold gently and act justly to attend the needs of people otherwise invisible; for all left homeless and destitute by the greed of others. Lead your people from darkness to light.

We pray for the Marys and Josephs of every land – those who face the enormous vocation of raising children, for infants born this day, especially those born into hunger and insecurity. Let the light of your desire for our well-being shine through the care offered all children.

We pray for everyone who is in need today – for the lonely, for the anxious, for elders in nursing homes, for friends without work, for those struggling with addiction, despair or ailments of body and spirit. Hear our prayers as we name these good souls now silently in our hearts...

We remember with thanksgiving those who have gone before us. Fill us with a spirit of joy, as we too celebrate your birth. Fill us with a spirit of expectancy, as we continually await your fulfillment of creation. Fill us with peace, for with you all things truly are possible. Hear us now as we offer the prayer taught to us by Christ our Lord, saying (Lord's Prayer)

SCRIPTURE LESSON (RANDY) Matthew 2:13-18

¹³Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." ¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

Hymn "The Coventry Carol"

Chapter 6: A Donkey's Benediction

We didn't wait for Herod. We set out for Egypt, not telling anyone where we had gone, and I carried Mary and her baby, many days and nights, into safety.

[Click here to continue reading the remainder of the story.](#)

Closing Words

And so ends Jeanette Winterson's story, "The Lion, the Unicorn, and me." I like thinking about Christmas morning from the donkey's perspective. I like the image of people hanging from the rafters and sleeping on doorsteps in Bethlehem. I'm saddened yet grateful for the confusion of the innkeeper – a man who was blind to the birth that happened just outside his home, and who welcomed a visit from Herod as being a good thing, not realizing it would be a visit of violence and sin.

Good stories always have both darkness and light in them. In that way, they are the same as each of us, children of darkness and children of light. What we share during the Christmas season is a good story. For all of its talk of angels and miracles, the good news is that there is always a part for us to play in this story – whether we're kings or accountants, shepherds or retirees, lions, unicorns, or donkeys. May the good news of Christ's birth give us hope, peace and strength for the journey ahead and may our noses ever have a golden glow as we too raise our voices to heaven with Christmas joy!

Let us stand sing our final hymn "Joy to the World."

*Hymn "Joy to the World"

*Charge and Benediction

Postlude