



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

The Star Of Hope In The Deepest Night

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
December 24, 2008 - Christmas Eve

Merry Christmas everyone!

Tonight we have come together to celebrate the birth of Jesus, whom Christians call the Christ Child. There is an additional and harmonious celebration we must also note.

Forty years ago today, Christmas Eve, 1968, the crew of Apollo 8 gave us what *The New York Times* called “an ennobling Christmas present.” Three astronauts orbited the Moon, 240,000 miles away from earth. And from that vantage point, they beamed home pictures of this “planet earth our island home”. Later photos of the earth taken from the same vantage point were referred to as the “blue marble” photos. The astronauts in those live Christmas Eve broadcasts forty years ago read the first verses of Genesis, then signed off. One of the astronauts, Commander Frank Borman, said. “Merry Christmas. God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth.”

Archibald Macleish wrote of the event, “To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers [let us add tonight, “and sisters”] on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold — brothers [and sisters] who know now they are truly brothers [and sisters].” Forty years later, as the Times wrote this morning, “We are still brothers and sisters in the eternal cold, but increasingly connected by invisible threads, able to see — and hear and understand — one another as never before.” (Editorial, “Earthstruck,” *The New York Times*, December 24, 2008)

The interconnectivity of all of life is one of the central messages of All Saints Church. We proclaim that message with great joy and gratitude. The interconnectivity truth is beautifully expressed in my favorite quotation from Dr. King, “**Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.**” (Letter From a Birmingham Jail)

We at All Saints know and feel that interconnectivity no more powerfully than on occasions like this when the good will, support, and solidarity of people who do not regularly worship here are present with us this night. I am speaking about all of you visitors and in a special light those sisters and brothers of other faiths with whom All Saints joins hands in common purpose every day in Los Angeles to make peace and to extend the boundaries of justice and inclusion and equality for all. These are friends with whom All Saints Church strives to increase the Compassion Quotient of the human heart and of this orb we call Earth. We acknowledge together that we may have come in different boats but on this globe we are all in the same boat.

Your dedicated collegiality inspires us and energizes us so that working together we may turn the human race into the human family. To be religious in the 21st century is to be interreligious. We at All Saints often look to our friends in other religions and say, “I have interfaith in you.” [laughter]

Interestingly enough, last year in this service I spoke of the importance of making peace from an interfaith perspective. Someone in that congregation took me to lunch after Christmas and proposed that he film an interfaith liturgy – a liturgy for peace – if we would gather together our interfaith partners to express the heart of that Christmas Eve sermon in a variety of voices. We did just that on Memorial Day last May. 900 people gathered in this room. Many of the speakers from that service are here tonight. The documentary made of that interfaith peace service has been airing in Los Angeles and throughout the country all this week as a Christmas gift from that worshipper, and in January it will air throughout the Middle East with Arabic and Farsi subtitles. The documentary says that peacemaking is not an option for Judaism, Islam and Christianity, but is a central mandate. Peace cannot come to this beautiful blue marble unless we live embodying the truth of our interconnectedness.

When the Apollo astronauts sent us that image that sculpted our conscience it functioned as a bright star of hope into the darkness of 1968. The *Times* noted that, “From Vietnam to the Middle East to the streets of Paris, Mexico City and across the United States, the view from the ground was bloody and bleak.” I myself remember watching on TV the bloody chaos of the Democratic National Convention riots and police brutality in a park in Chicago. There was a much different scene in that same park last month when Barack Obama spoke there celebrating his election as the next President of the United States of America. That election has become a bright star of hope for people of all political parties here but also for people throughout the world.

Barack Obama’s election reminded me of one of the most formative conversations I ever had in my life. The conversation was about hope and was held near the end of my sabbatical journey in Cape Town, South Africa, 6 years ago. I was having breakfast with a group who had just enjoyed an early morning communion celebrated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. My breakfast mate that morning asked me about my travels to Israel/Palestine, where I had visited just prior to flying to South Africa. I told him that I had found people there both persevering and on the brink of despair.

This gentleman leaned over the table and said with a sense of passion and conviction rare in my travels. “There is never any cause for despair.” He continued, “I was the mayor of Cape Town, South Africa during the worst days of apartheid here. I despaired over and over that we would have a national blood bath. I was despairing of any solution to the escalating cycle of violence and oppression and injustice. Little did I know that God was truly working - working in the dark. Working in a hidden corner of life in a jail cell with a man named Mandela, working with this man for 28 years. And when Mandela was released and I was the mayor of Cape Town, rather than call for revenge, Mandela said that he had lived his life fighting domination of one race over the other and that he would continue to do so, even if it took his life. At that moment I could feel hearts throughout this city disarming themselves. My friend,” he concluded, “God is always at work in the deepest of nights and conditions, calling surprising people into surprising roles of leadership and ministry. Who knows with whom God is working right now as we are eating these breakfast eggs someone who will help to interrupt the escalating cycle of violence, oppression, and injustice in the Middle East?”

That former mayor of Cape Town was expressing the central message that has gathered us in this room tonight. The central message of Christmas is that it is into our deepest nights that the light of God’s love comes in a tangible way. God is always working in the conditions that would lead one to despair. Reinhold Niebuhr famously said, “The life of a person of faith should be a life that makes no sense until you factor in their faith in God.”

There is no historical evidence about the actual birth date of Jesus. No historian wrote, "It took place on December 25." But Christian tradition has said, "We should place the celebration of the birth of Jesus in the Winter solstice. Thereby we can send a profound symbolic message that the embodiment of Divine Love and Divine Light comes in those times of life when nighttime is longer than daylight. My friends, this means that you and I are in this room together tonight to celebrate a central truth about the power of Love. It will not be overcome by life's nighttimes.

In less than 30 days now, there will come to an end eight years of experiencing how destructive it is to have a foreign policy built on the externalization of evil. The war in Iraq so expensive in life and resources accompanied by the immorality of the torture of certain brothers and sisters on this island home of ours – that war was fabricated on a theology that the evil done in the world is done by "evil doers" external to ourselves, thus relieving us of any moral introspection, confession, and reckoning for our role in the injustice and violence in this world. The forces of darkness are not only outside us, resident in those who plot terrorism. Evil is inside *us* who spend billions of dollars on a war system that deprives people of their very lives, deprives children of health care and quality education and perpetuates a cycle of poverty that is indeed a slow form of terrorism and war, and impedes our care of the environment. Lest we relax into a false sense of complacency, President-elect Obama, while pledging to stress diplomacy over warfare, has also promised to "maintain the most powerful military on the planet" and to increase the armed forces by some 90,000 soldiers. According to the Congressional Budget Office, that will cost at least \$50 billion over five years.

I believe that the Christmas message is that just as it is destructive to externalize evil, it is also destructive to externalize divinity. One of the Christian gospels described the meaning of this night by saying that the light that enlightens every person came into the world – became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1) And for you and me to refuse to look at the evil inside our hearts as well as to refuse to see that each of us has the divine within – both are acts of irresponsibility.

My friends, YOU are the person. You are the Mandela God is working with in the deepest night. You are the person in the stable in the cold outside the inn where there is no room for you. You, You, You. You and I miss the entire point of this story if we think it is a story mostly about the past. This *is* a story about Mary the mother of Jesus saying, "Let it be with me the servant of the Lord," and this *is* a story about Jesus who insisted that in every person he met, "The Kingdom of God is within you." Tonight's story is mostly a story about the present. God is asking that the light that enlightens every person must come into the world – through you and me – particularly where you and I are experiencing a deep night or the deepest night. I don't know what that looks like for you. But I have three examples to hold before you.

There have been so many people in pain in this country as a result of Rick Warren being invited to give the invocation for Barack Obama – Rick Warren, a pastor who excludes gay people from membership in his church. I encourage you, if you have strong feelings about that to exercise the responsibility of writing the President-elect about that, and/or you can certainly write Rick Warren and pray for his own understanding that God's love is not exclusionary but inclusionary.

Let me give you two other examples of what it looks like in other people's lives to let the light that is within them come into the world as it did with Jesus. Last Easter after the Superintendent of public schools here asked All Saints for a group of mentors who would take on a one-on-one relationship with 9th graders and help them have successful high school careers, we asked worshipers to volunteer for that profound responsibility. We now have 30 members of All Saints who have been trained and are waiting for their assignments. Each of those members is a star of hope in the nighttime for at-risk youth.

My final example is on a more personal level. Each couple I marry goes through several hours of pre-marital preparation. For each person I draw a four-generation map of his or her family on an 8 ½ by 11 sheet of paper. After drawing each genogram I ask the person to give me a tag line from a movie or a song or a book that summarizes the story of their family. Then I put those two sheets of paper together and fit a third page below and ask the couple to name the traits and values of their family they want to bring down to the fresh page and which ones they want to keep up in their family of origin. [laughter]

When I asked one member of the couple I have in mind what the tag line for her family was, she immediately said, “What’s love got to do with it?” the popular song by Tina Turner. When I asked why, she said, “In my family of origin, anger and control always trump love.”

Then she told a story of the latest family reunion. The entire family, all four of her siblings, mother and father, and grandchildren had spent several days at a vacation spot near a lake. Her sister had recently had a conversion experience making a life commitment to a life of prayer and embodied love. These two sisters got up each morning of the vacation before anyone else was up and they would go to the bank of the lake and prayerfully commit that in everything the family did that day to let love trump anger and control. That prayer and commitment has now begun to shift the entire family.

That is the miracle of Christmas it seems to me. Tonight’s story is about this mother, Mary, and her son, a baby named Jesus, in Bethlehem whose inner, divine light came into the world in a unique way to form commitments to let love and inclusion always, always trump. For only inclusion and love can make us on this island home truly become the brothers and sisters God has made us to be.

But you and I will not be exercising the responsibility of becoming stars of hope on this blue marble orb if you and I leave it up to Barack Obama or some other admirable figure on whom we project our need for heroism. The Light which is Love which insists on coming into the world cannot come into the world unless it uses *people* – us. This light, love, and hope we celebrate tonight include. They do not exclude. They exercise compassion not domination, they advocate for the dignity of every person not just the advantage of some over the many.

The Times article I’ve been quoting tonight closed this way. “The real Earth seen from the Moon is surely as lovely as ever, even with thinner ice caps, smaller forests, fewer gorillas and tigers and a few billion more people. We are still brothers and sisters in the eternal cold, but increasingly connected by invisible threads, able to see — and hear and understand — one another as never before.” But we will not be able to protect this orb and protect one another if we do not take responsibility of embodying hope and love in the lives of everyone else.

God is not impressed by our success in anything other than bringing love into this world. And when you and I take the responsibility of bringing love into this world we will then do our job of being stars of hope in the deepest night as did Jesus, and then we will do our part to turn the human race into the human family.

Amen.