

“The Christ Candle Is Always Lit”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
December 24th, 2012,
Christmas Eve

John 1:1-14, Luke 1:26-38, Luke 1:39-45, Matt. 1:18-25,
Luke 2:1-7, Matt. 2:1-8, Luke 2:8-20, Matt. 2:9-12

‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.’

John 1:5

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to see that you are always present and that we need not ever be afraid
of the dark places in which we may find ourselves.

Amen

There is a need to re-enchant the world – especially for the sake of children,
the next generation growing up.

It’s not so much a matter of believing in Santa Claus
as it is in growing up with the belief in broader possibilities, wider vistas,
frontiers yet to be explored – and that we are not all penned in.

Not just children, but the child in all of us

yearns for opportunities that will lead to a good life,
and not – as writer John DeGraaf puts it, ‘the goods life’.

Sometimes we find the good life amid places where we might not otherwise go –
desert places where we get stuck financially, physically, emotionally,
sometimes in the face of tragic circumstances, even death.

It is difficult for any of us when bad things happen anytime,
but especially at holidays when our expectations are already high.

And it doesn’t take a catastrophe to put us over the edge
when gift-shopping, card writing, house-cleaning for visitors,
or cooking a big meal can do that for us.

Nevertheless, trouble comes in this life without an invitation
and thanks to the instantaneous messaging of the Internet,
we all can get more than we want of a share in others’ grief.

Last year – that first Sunday after the news about Newtown,
it was as if I noticed for the first time that our Advent Wreath Christ Candle
wasn’t lit.

It is not supposed to be, because – according to Advent tradition,
we light the four outer candles in succession during the four Sundays
previous to Christmas – which represent hope, peace, joy, and love.

The central, white pillar candle is not lit until Christmas Eve
symbolizing the birth of Christ.

Willard, p.2

What it should not signify is that Christ was somehow absent
before this candle was lit.

That 4th Sunday of Advent, I went ahead and lit the Christ Candle
as a reminder for us all that Christ is always present.

Advent and Christmas are our 'Festival of Lights' –

just like other religious cultures have a "Festival of Lights".

For our friends at Temple Shalom, that is 'Hanukkah when Jewish people
celebrate the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem.

They light one candle of a menorah each day for eight days

commemorating how just a small amount of oil lasted to keep

the lamp signifying God's presence, lit until more could be prepared.

Hindus celebrate Diwali on the last moonless night at the end of fall

in a four day celebration that includes decorating their homes with lights.

Burmese Buddhists have a celebration they call Tazaungdaing which also comes
at the end of fall, but with the full moon.

These traditions are all different from each other,

but they are really about the same thing –

humankind's fear of the dark, a child's fear.

As days grow shorter with the lengthening shadows of autumn afternoons,

primitive people feared the sun would sink below the horizon

and disappear altogether.

After a while, they realized this was probably not going to happen,

so they came up with rituals to symbolize the return of the sun's light

and say thanks.

Christianity is no different and that sums up what Christ came to do –

free us from our fear of the darkness, inside us and out.

Christ is always present,

but we have got to do our part to turn on the light so we can see.

I was once told that the Kingdom of God is like a dark room filled with things

that we can't see until we turn the light on – the light of faith,

the willingness to believe and be enchanted by God's grace.

Christ is the light by which we can see

the beauty of everyday miracles, the courage of routine,

the joy that defies sorrow, even the humanity of an enemy.

Christ is the light by which we see ourselves in a proper perspective

of humility and beauty, too.

Willard, p.3

There's a lot of talk these days on the Internet about political correctness
and just how much people ought to talk about their beliefs –
or about what they condemn.

But regardless of the attitudes someone may have –
the main thing is to disavow hatred and hate speech,
by forgiving and loving your enemies.

We can do this if we are open to the light of Christ, the light of love
that shows us our faults as well as our strengths
before we evaluate such qualities in others.

The motivation to be politically correct –
which promotes mutuality, respect, and love, is good;
But even this stance can be taken to an extreme
leading to arrogance and blindness as one becomes the very thing one hates.

Nativity scenes and holiday greetings are once again issues for dispute.
Perhaps the light of Christ's love can enter such disagreements
to expose the silliness as well as the sensitivity of a situation.

Consider the plight of such a traditional, religious person
who struggles with new progressive sensibilities ...

*'Twas the night before Christmas and Santa's a wreck...
How to live in a world that's politically correct?
His workers no longer would answer to "Elves,"
"Vertically Challenged" they were calling themselves.
And labor conditions at the north pole
Were alleged by the union to stifle the soul.
And to show you the strangeness of life's ebbs and flows,
Rudolf was suing over unauthorized use of his nose
And had gone on TV, in front of the nation,
Demanding millions in over-due compensation.*

*And as for the gifts, why, he'd ne'er had a notion
That making a choice could cause so much commotion.
Nothing of leather, nothing of fur,
Which meant nothing for him. And nothing for her.
Nothing that might be construed to pollute.
Nothing to aim. Nothing to shoot.
Nothing that clamored or made lots of noise.
Nothing for just girls. Or just for the boys.
No candy or sweets...they were bad for the tooth.
Nothing that seemed to expand on the truth.*

Willard, p.4

*So Santa just stood there, disheveled, perplexed;
He just could not figure out what to do next.
His sack was quite empty, limp to the ground;
Nothing fully acceptable was to be found.*

*Something special was needed, a gift that he might
Give to all without angering the left or the right.
A gift that would satisfy, with no indecision,
Each group of people, every religion;
Every ethnicity, every hue,
Everyone, everywhere...even you.*

*So here is that gift, its price beyond worth...
"May you and your loved ones enjoy peace on earth."*

adapted from material by Harvey Ehrlich, 1992
<http://www.santaclaus.com/christmas-humor.php>

Maybe humor can help us see better to keep things light –
the light of Christ, the humor of Christ that celebrates the good in life
no matter what the circumstances.

Amen

John.1

[1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

[2] He was in the beginning with God;

[3] all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

[4] In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

[5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

[6] There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

[7] He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him.

[8] He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

[9] The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.

[10] He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not.

[11] He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.

[12] But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God;

[13] who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

[14] And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

[15] (John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'")

[16] And from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace.

[17] For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

[18] No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

IN THE BEGINNING, THE WORD WAS EXPRESSED
AND THE WORD STOOD BEFORE GOD
AND THE WORD WAS GOD'S NAME COME TO LIFE.
THE WORD WAS PRESENT WITH GOD AS THINGS BEGAN TO BE.

THROUGH THE WORD, WAS MADE ALL THAT THERE IS
AND NO CREATED THING WAS MADE SEPARATE FROM THIS.
LIFE WAS IN THE WORD,
AND LIFE HAS BEEN THE LIGHT OF HUMANITY.
AND THE LIGHT SHONE FORTH IN THE GLOOM,
AND THE GLOOM COULD NOT HOLD IT BACK.

A HUMAN BEING WAS SENT BY GOD;
HIS NAME IS JOHN.
HE CAME AS A MARTYR TO BEAR WITNESS TO THE LIGHT,
SO THAT EVERYONE WOULD BELIEVE THROUGH HIM.
HE WAS NOT THE LIGHT,
BUT RATHER BORE WITNESS ABOUT THE LIGHT.
THE LIGHT WAS REAL, ILLUMINATING ALL OF HUMANITY
AS IT WAS PROCEEDING INTO THE WORLD.
THE LIGHT WAS IN THE WORLD
AND THE WORLD CAME TO BE THROUGH THE LIGHT,
BUT THE WORLD DID NOT UNDERSTAND THIS.

THE LIGHT HAD COME ALONE,
AND WAS NOT ACCEPTED BY US AS A GROUP.
BUT AS MANY AS THERE HAVE BEEN
WHO HAVE TRUSTED THE NAME OF GOD,
THEY HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE POWER
TO BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD.
THIS HAS BEEN SO,
NOT BECAUSE OF HUMAN DESIRE, NOR PHYSICAL NEED,
NOR LOGICAL REASON, BUT BECAUSE OF GOD'S DESIRE.

AND THE WORD WAS EXPRESSED AS A LIVING BODY,
AND LIVED WITH US.
AND THE LIGHT'S BLESSING HAS BEEN RECOGNIZED,
BLESSED AS BEING THE ONLY OFFSPRING
OF THE BELOVED GUARDIAN,
PERFECTED IN TALENT AND TRUTH.