

# *Christmas Eve Service 1993*

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**[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)**

**December 24, 1993**

(Our service begins when the music begins. We request your silence for the prelude.)

PRELUDE

OPENING WORDS: Great ideas come into the world as gently as a dove. Perhaps, then, if we listen attentively, we shall hear amid the uproar of empires and nations the faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirrings of life and hope. --Albert Camus

CONGREGATIONAL CAROL:

People, look East. The time is near  
Of the crowning of the year.  
Make your house fair as you are able,  
Trim the hearth, and set the table.  
People, look East, and sing today:  
Love, the Guest, is on the way.

Furrows, be glad. Though earth is bare,  
One more seed is planted there.  
Give of your strength the seed to nourish,  
That in course the flower may flourish.  
People, look East, and sing today:  
Love, the Rose, is on the way.

Stars, keep the watch. When night is dim  
One more light the bowl shall brim,  
Shining beyond the frosty weather,  
Bright as sun and moon together.  
People, look East, and sing today:  
Love, the Star, is on the way.

READING: from Waldemar Argow

When the white wolf of winter stalks through the snow with the dead  
year in its mouth;  
When the days grow short as a dying soul's breath;  
When earth is iron and water is stone, when cold kills and darkness  
overwhelms the spirit in us.

Then it is that the strange thing happens!

Out of the depths of despair, joy blossoms.  
Out of December death, life bursts forth!

For Christmas comes! Christmas comes like a star in the east, like an angel singing, like a god assuming mortality --like all the impossible things that mystify the mind and secretly delight the heart.

Now the carols ring and the children shout; now the candles shine and the fire burns bright on the Christmas hearth.

And now the white wolf slinks away into the night, and crouching in the darkness watches hopelessly its prey, for even a beast can recognize defeat, and in some dumb, inchoate way know that life has conquered death.

RESPONSIVE READING:

In this night,  
the stars left their habitual places

**And kindled wildfire tidings  
that spread faster than sound.**

In this night  
the shepherds left their posts

**To shout the new slogans  
into each other's clogged ears.**

In this night  
the foxes left their warm burrows

**And the lion spoke with  
deliberation,  
"This is the end  
revolution."**

In this night  
roses fooled the earth

**And began to bloom  
in the snow.**

*--Dorothee Solle*

OFFERTORY

READING:

*Once in the midst of darkness,  
darkness deeper than any night,*

*not the close, warm darkness  
of peaceful rest and renewal  
but the cold darkness of hatred, prejudice, blinding fear,  
the bitter darkness of hunger and want and desperate need,  
once in the midst of darkness  
the children of the earth huddled together  
clutching to themselves the familiar terror,  
the deep dread of all that was new or strange or unfamiliar,  
the unreasoning fear of those they knew and did not know  
in the next house, the next street, the next town,  
fear of all that lay beyond the horizon of their experience.  
The world was a place of danger and threat  
the world was beyond understanding  
and fearing to trust themselves, other people, the world  
each new event, each new face was greeted  
with suspicion and hatred.  
And with each passing year  
the numbing darkness on the face of the earth  
and in the human heart  
grew deeper and deeper.*

Then, out of the darkness came one  
bearing a spark of light.  
Where first the light was found, we do not know.  
From what generous spark it was kindled  
in the encompassing darkness no one can say  
Perhaps it was a gift from some other light bearer,  
some chance acquaintance,  
some unrecorded contact,  
for the bearers of the light have emerged again and again  
out of the shadows of our common world.  
Whatever the source,  
out of humanity's unrelieved darkness  
come one bearing light.  
The shadows and the gloom fled away;  
in the presence of the light-bearer  
human hearts began to thaw  
icy fear, prejudice, hatred and suspicion  
began to melt away.

In the presence of the light,  
people began to see more clearly,  
to understand more fully,  
to trust more completely.  
In the presence of the light,  
people began to understand that they

and all people--friends and strangers  
--were children of the one earth,  
the offspring of the same great love  
which created the universe,  
that the world was home  
and need not be a fearsome place.  
And slowly the darkness began to lift.  
The light carried into a darkened world  
by one individual  
touched off sparks in the lives of others  
so that when the light-bearer's days were accomplished  
there were lights burning here and there  
in many places--in the lives of many people--  
and the darkness was driven back for a time.

*The bearers of the light have many names.  
they have come again and again  
to the children of earth,  
reminding all who hear  
of the great truth  
that greater than hate is love  
and greater than fear is faith  
and greater than despair is hope.  
Tonight,  
when our world is dark,  
when the days are short  
and the sun is dim  
and the nights seem never to end,  
in this world  
where hatred and fear  
suspicion and violence  
greed and malice  
still darken human existence,  
we come together, as is our custom,  
to sing the old songs  
and recount the old tales  
which speak of the birth of the light-bearer,  
of the holy child born at the midnight of the year,  
who is every child,  
the holy child  
who, over the millennia, has symbolized  
all those women and men of whatever age or tradition  
who have come into the world  
bearing light into the shadows.  
We gather here,  
at the midnight of the year,*

*to give thanks for the light.  
We come seeking to make the light of love and hope and joy  
burn in our lives  
that the world may be brighter  
by our living in it.*

CONGREGATIONAL CAROL:

Joy to the world! the children come:  
Let Earth rejoice and sing;  
Let every heart prepare them room,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the earth! the shadows fade  
While we our songs employ,  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

Joy to the world, the light is come:  
Let earth with rapture ring;  
Let every heart now cast out gloom  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven and nature sing,  
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

READING:

BEVERLY For two thousand years we have celebrated the birth of light and hope in the midst of darkness by recounting at Christmas time wondrous tales of marvelous events which accompanied the birth of "the light of the world."

STEPHEN: It is said that on the night the infant was born, a new star, a bright star appeared in the sky, telling all the world that this new-born child would bring blessing upon all the earth.

BEVERLY: It is reported that on that night a choir of angels sang to a band of shepherds, announcing the coming of a marvelous child who would lead the world to peace and goodwill.

STEPHEN: Some say that three kings from distant lands travelled many miles, following the star, and that shepherds deserted their flocks that dark night, and went in search of the marvelous child.

BEVERLY: It is said they found the child in a stable, soothed by the sounds of the animals. They say the mother was the most beautiful of women and the father the kindest, gentlest of men, and that a strange light filled the humble room, while the babe slept peacefully in a manger.

CONGREGATIONAL CAROL:

Angels we have heard on high  
Sweetly singing o'er the plains  
And the mountains in reply  
Echoing their joyous strains.  
Gloria in excelsis Deo

Shepherds, why this jubilee?  
Why these songs of happy cheer?  
What great brightness did you see?  
What glad tidings did you hear?  
Gloria in excelsis Deo

Now is born the Child of love,  
Child for whom the ages long  
Earth below and stars above  
Raise aloud the joyous song.  
Gloria in excelsis Deo

READING:

STEPHEN: We, today, are inclined to argue about whether such things really happened.

BEVERLY: In our world, new stars do not shine to announce the birth of a babe. In our world, sages and rulers are too busy to seek out the birth place of low-born infants. In our world shepherds and workers cannot abandon their responsibilities for such a quest. Angels do not sing in our world, and the light which surrounds the new-born no longer seems strange or holy.

STEPHEN: Those who try to prove that miraculous things did not happen that night so long ago, have not understood the ancient tale. The story is not meant to tell us what happened once upon a time, far, far away, but rather what is always happening for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

BEVERLY: Perhaps there never was a star; perhaps there were no angels. But when the bearers of the light are born, the universe quivers with hope. Perhaps the stable was not filled with wondrous light, but whenever a child is born, hope is renewed, the room seems brightened by the presence of new life, and all the world seems forever changed.

## MUSIC:

READING: Perhaps this is the reason the Christmas story has been told and retold for all these long years. Perhaps this is the reason the story is still told, even by those who no longer believe in angels and stars and miraculous events. For all these years the tale has been told of a child born in a stable and how the world received that child. And in the telling, we have heard another message: We have heard something about who we are and how we ought to regard one another. We have heard about wise rulers falling on their knees before a newborn child, and in our minds stirs the understanding that wealth and power cannot replace humility and love; we have heard about shepherds leaving their sheep to find the new child, and in our minds has stirred the suspicion that our responsibility to each other is more important than any other thing. And throughout the tale runs the suggestion that the world is more mysterious than we know and that in light of that mystery we needs must deal gently with each other.

## CONGREGATIONAL CAROL:

It Came upon the midnight clear,  
That glorious song of old,  
From angels bending near the earth,  
To touch their harps of gold:  
"Peace on the earth, to all good-will,"  
The words down the ages ring.  
The world in solemn stillness lay  
To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come,  
With peaceful wings unfurled;  
And still their heavenly music floats  
O'er all the weary world.  
Above its sad and lowly plains  
They bend on hovering wing;  
And ever o'er its Babel sounds  
The blessed angels sing.

But with the woes of sin and strife  
The world has suffered long;  
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled  
Two thousand years of wrong;  
And foe, at war with foe, hears not  
The love song which they bring.  
O hush the noise, O cease the strife,  
And hear the angels sing.

For, lo! the days are hastening on

By prophet bards foretold,  
When with the ever-circling years  
Comes round the age of gold:  
When peace shall over all the earth  
Its ancient splendors fling,  
And the whole world give back the song  
Which now the angels sing.

READING:

*Christmas speaks of something more. The ancient tale suggests that the world belongs to children and to those who can become as children--to those who can look upon every star as if it were brand new and know that it shines for them. The world belongs to those who can set out on long journeys, leaving behind familiar places and comfortable conventions, searching for that which is of ultimate significance. The world belongs to the fresh and young of whatever age who are willing to embrace the strange and novel world of tomorrow, and to those wise enough to know that the future always exists among us, waiting to disclose itself to those willing to see. And because Christmas is the season which turns us toward the future, it is also the celebration which proclaims a world of peace--both as future promise and present reality. Christmas assures us that despite the darkness of this threatened and harried world, someday the human race must learn to live in the clear light of peace and goodwill--peace with all people the world around, and peace with the planet which is our mother and our home. And Christmas reminds us that the peace we seek is rooted in our ability to live fully and serenely in the midst of this present world of incompleteness and imperfection.*

STEPHEN: When peace comes, the world will find the time to celebrate the birth and own the holiness of every child.

DAVID: When peace comes, we look at the sky and see the stars as if they were new.

STEPHEN: When peace comes, we will understand what is true worth, what gives life its meaning and zest.

BEVERLY: When peace comes, the birth of every child will be an occasion for rejoicing, and rulers and sages and common folk will join in celebrating the hope and promise born among them.

STEPHEN: When peace comes, we will let go our remorse for past failings. When peace comes we will embrace with gratitude the blessings of the present and the promise of the future.

BEVERLY: On that far away day of peace, Christmas will come to the world not once a year, but with joy and light every day of every year. Let the day of peace begin with us, this night.

CONGREGATIONAL CAROL:

I heard the bells on Christmas day  
Their old familiar, carols play,  
And wild and sweet the words repeat  
of "Peace on earth, to all good will."

I thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all christendom  
Had rolled along th'unbroken song  
Of "Peace on earth, to all good will."

And in despair I bowed my head;  
"There is no peace on earth" I said,  
For hate is strong and mocks the song  
Of "Peace on earth, to all good will."

Then peal'd the bells more loud and deep:  
"Hope is not dead; nor doth love sleep"  
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail  
With "Peace on earth, to all good will."

LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES

MUSIC:

READING: Now from this chalice, receive the flame. As the light bearers come down the aisle, they will light the candles of those seated on the aisle. Each of these people will light the candle of the person in the next seat. Thus, with great care, you will pass the flame from one to another. Remember, as the flame passes, the lives of those who have been bearers of the light, the women and men who have touched your lives with the flame of hope and love, and who have made our common world a more gracious home for the human spirit. Remember as the flame passes, that while it is beautiful, it is also dangerous. Pass the flame with special care, and take care of those around you that the flame may illumine but cause none harm.

Now all the candles are lit. Pause for a moment. Look about you. See the lights burning in the darkness. See the shadows that are cast. Give thought to those who have preceded us in this place, and to those who will come after us. Think for a moment of the miracle this symbolizes, how from one light many flames are kindled. Think for a moment of what we must be and do if we are to tend the flame of hope and love in our own lives; if we are to pass that flame on to our children, our children's children, to all others we encounter.

CONGREGATIONAL CAROL:

Silent night, holy night,  
All is calm, all is bright.  
Round yon gentle mother and child,  
Holy infant so tender and mild,  
Sleep in heavenly peace,  
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night,  
Shepherds quake, at the sight,  
Glories stream from heaven afar,  
Heavenly hosts sing "Alleluia  
Child of Light at thy birth,  
Child of light at thy birth."

Silent night, holy night,  
Child of hope, love's pure light.  
Radiant beams from thy holy face  
With the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Child of light, at thy birth,  
Child of light at they birth.

Now, with care, extinguish the candle in your hands, knowing that the flame still dances in your heart.

BEVERLY: Thus we celebrate this evening, as women and men and children have celebrated for centuries, the coming of the light into a darkened world, and the passing of light from life to life.

DAVID: We rejoice that no matter how hate-filled and bent on destruction the world may seem, the precious light of hope and faith, of love and trust continues to shine forth from the lives of men and women who will not surrender to the darkness.

BEVERLY: Sometimes that light is hard to find. Sometimes it flickers and all but disappears; sometimes it seems the blanket of hatred and violence, of fear and prejudice must smother it; but still it burns, and the promise is that someday it will set a spark in the dry tinder of everyone's life. Then it will light up the world and drive away the shadows of fear.

DAVID: Until that day, we who would be people of the light must guard the precious flame, tend it in our own lives, pass it carefully from generation to generation, and together rejoice, especially at the midnight of the year, that the light of hope and love still burns.

BEVERLY: Rejoice this day in the light that is the hope of the world. Let a merry Christmas remind us of our obligation to bear that light throughout the year.

CONGREGATIONAL CAROL:

O we believe in Christmas,  
And we keep Christmas day;  
And we will honor Christmas  
The ancient, world-wide way;  
The Christmas of all peoples,  
The sun's returning cheer  
Rung out from tower and steeple  
At midnight of the year.

And we will join at Christmas  
The song of hope and joy  
Which finds its theme at Christmas  
In every girl and boy.  
The flames of life will dwindle  
As fades the sunset sky  
Until a child shall kindle  
New light and raise it high.

Then sing we all at Christmas  
The song of that new birth  
Which holds the hope of Christmas  
And brings its joy to earth;  
Which knits the generations,  
All living 'neath the sun,  
Above all tribes and nations  
And makes the many one.

Shine out, ye lights of Christmas,  
From hearth and tree and star!  
And let the warmth of Christmas  
Shed kindness near and far!  
And clang, ye bells of Christmas  
Upon the frosty air!  
And may the joy of Christmas  
Spread gladness everywhere.

CLOSING WORDS:

There is a kind of immortality in this:  
*All the Christmas that went before and all  
that are to come  
Are joined tonight by this one hour.*

There is a kind of immortality in this:  
*To be alive tonight;*  
To share the immortal feast of Christmas;  
*To watch once more the candles glow;*  
To hear retold the ancient tale;  
*To hear and sing the ageless Christmas songs.*  
Rejoice that we are here, together once again.  
Rejoice in love and light.  
--Robert Thorstensen (adapted)

Postlude

(Our service ends when the music ends. You are invited to be seated for the postlude.)