

*"Midnight Mess"*

Rev. Martha ter Kuile

Minister of Worship and Pastoral Care

Bloor Street United Church

CHRISTMAS EVE – December 24, 2010

---

*Reading: Isaiah 9.2-7*

The people who walked in darkness  
    have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
    on them light has shined.  
You 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.  
For 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.  
For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
    and all the garments rolled in blood  
    shall be burned as fuel for the fire.  
For a child has been born for us,  
    a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
    and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
    Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His 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 onwards and for evermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

*Luke 2.1-20*

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

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

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her

heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

---

Gloria in excelsis Deo. Beyond beautiful. Holiest night. Most precious child. God with us.

Even so, the night and the whole season is filled with contrasts. Busyness and quiet. Hurry up, slow down. The chill of the outdoors and the warmth – sometimes too warm – of the indoors. Even the weather is unsettled. The gloom of close, cloudy days pierced this morning by the lovely brightness of unexpected sunshine, and then dim afternoons and early nightfall. Our emotions too may rise and fall in a strange way, filled with anticipation and happiness one moment and then suddenly tender and sad. Our sorrow is sometimes based on a memory – beloved time, beloved place, beloved person. Just as often, though, the melancholy that drifts in is just that – melancholy drifting in ... a simple sense of the poignancy of the season. But then the delight returns and we prepare for something wonderful, something unequivocal, something glorious.

If you think even of a group like this one gathered tonight, imagine the preparations. The care and attentiveness.

The beautiful Christmas decorations, trees and ornaments. In many homes each ornament has a story. With or without a tree, there will be small mementos and Christmas objects, some a bit tattered, but laden with memory and meaning.

And Christmas food – cakes and cookies, sometimes mincemeat and perhaps a turkey. Cranberry, and oranges, fruitbreads and bowls of nuts. We set the table with a special cloth. Perhaps bring out silver that needs polishing. And special glassware and serving plates and Christmas crackers. The quintessential blend of sublime and ridiculous.

Our communion table is another Christmas feast – the festive tablecloth, the beauty of the candelabra, candles lighted, wine and juice and bread made ready to be shared. We put on our best clothes and our best manners for the celebration.

And speaking of best clothes and best manners, this music! How wonderfully you are taking us tonight to another land of harmony and perfection. To a time of charm and ornament, to a culture of formality and court graces. We imagine a chateau, or a bishop's palace, the aristocratic milieu of patronage and power. The sounds that first emerged in the mind of Charpentier ring out across the centuries and through your bodies and your spirits to this moment. And thus each of us in turn receives the gift. Some people say music is a taste of paradise, a glimpse of the absolute. They say it brings the human spirit into a dimension which is more than human.

Well, yes. Indeed, all these things that we do at Christmas – the lovely music, the gifts and food, even the tableware are symbolic as well as tangible. They comprise our feeble efforts to capture and express a reality that extends far beyond us. They embody our attempt to touch the divine.

But here is the funny thing. Just at the moment when we are trying to make sure everything is just right, God is going the other direction. God is determined to be here, not just here at church or in a baroque palace, but here on earth, in a stable. God doesn't care if the table is set properly. God comes seeking humanity in humanity's messy state. In the middle of the night when the days are short and the future uncertain.

For the true life of humanity is never as pristine or lovely as we might hope. Never what you might think if you heard us singing in a choir. We are fragile, both as individuals and in our collective life. Herod was the king when the baby arrived in Bethlehem, the exploitive puppet of a ruthless empire. A bad scene altogether. And in France in Charpentier's time, another bad scene – even the musical politics were corrupt. And the peasants were miserably poor, and the church was about to start persecuting the Huguenots again. Along with its colony in Quebec, France had

recently established forts in Senegal and created a new company to manage the slave trade monopoly.

Or look around us now – the pain of living is as sharp now as ever. Look at the 42 million refugees not at home tonight, look at our suffering planet, look at some of the people along Bloor Street just here by the church. And as we know from our own families and friendships, rich or poor, powerful or humble, most lives encompass hardship. Being human is a messy business. So as we reach out toward beauty and love, God comes to us to be with us, into the midnight mess, in beauty and in love.

The baby is born in the stable because that is where humanity lives. The grown man invites his friends to the table because that is where humanity lives. And the devoted servant goes to the cross because that is where humanity lives. In the midnight mess, God inhabits the earth, because this is where we live.

Immanuel, God with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.