

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Christmas Eve- December 24, 2006

A CHRISTMAS MEDITATION

In our worship here we almost always light the Trinity candles on our communion table. In the Advent season, we add our candle lights from the Advent wreath. On two *extraordinary* nights of the year, we give candles their most prominent place of all.

One of those is Good Friday. On that night, we have daylight when we begin. We have twelve Tenebrae candles that shine from the table. As evening falls and we remember Jesus' last hours, we extinguish those candles one by one. By the end of Good Friday worship, we're in the dark.

The other time is tonight on Christmas Eve. We had *no* daylight when we began because this is one of the year's longest nights. But we started with the Trinity candles, the Advent candles, *and* our window candles all lit. We've added to them the light of the Christ candle. Before long, we'll each hold our own candle when we sing *Silent Night*. Tonight our service will end with the most candlelight we ever have.

Candles highlight these two special occasions for us because they help to illumine two unique and extraordinary pictures of God. When they go out on Good Friday, they give us God on the cross. As they glow bright tonight, they show us God in a manger.

We always join with our Muslim friends in proclaiming that "God is great!" But tonight we especially remember that, as Christians, we announce the good news that God also is very small. We rejoice in the gospel that God is so great that for our sakes God becomes so small. Tonight when we look into Bethlehem's manger, that's what we see.

We see the God of all heaven and earth lying there as a tiny baby, in love for us. The eternal Word made flesh can't walk, can't talk, can't feed himself, and has to have his clothes swaddled. He's completely dependent on the care of his newlywed teenaged mother and handyman father. As St. Paul later would put it, the greatness of God, the nature of God's almighty power is revealed most fully right here in this weakness, this baby, this God in the flesh. We love the candles that can light up for us so great a sight.

It's the complete lack of airs, the sheer humility, the pure self-emptying that amaze us so much. The glorious God in the highest, out of free and perfect love, chooses to come down and be one of us. The infinite God of all worlds commits forever to us in this flesh in order to bring God's light into every nook and crevice of our life. God in a manger and God on the cross show us that there's no place so humble or situation so dark that God will not enter it to bring the light of redeeming grace.

This is the mind-bending good news we need always desperately to hear and to take to heart. Each of us, if we dare, can search the truth of our own lives. Each of us, if we dare, can ponder the larger realities of this world we share. In doing so, we're driven to ask, "How low do we sometimes sink? How dark do our circumstances sometimes become?"

Insecurity, ignorance, misunderstanding, malice, and violence- violence subtle or overt in our thoughts, words, and deeds- all of these sow and reap havoc in and among us. The darkness of frailty, suffering, and death hang constantly over each of us. Yet the holy Word comes to us again tonight with great force. We are assured- we don't have to be afraid; we need never despair because Jesus Christ is born. God is *with* us.

Of course, we know, we know, we know- how often have we heard it said? Yet where's the proof of it? Which of us have ever had this light, this presumed divine light shining from Jesus Christ, come into our deepest darkness and change anything? We say we're here tonight to celebrate that light. Hundreds of millions people, all across the globe, allegedly are joining us to do the same thing. But do we do it only as mere fluff, as hollow tradition, as sweet, but superficial sentiment that barely scratches our surface?

As a child, Jonathan Nobles suffered severe abuse at the hands of his mother. As an adult, he became a mean, violent, drug-addicted man. One night he stabbed to death Kelley Farquhar and Mitzi Johnson-Nalley. He stabbed and took out the eye of Nalley's boyfriend, Ron Ross. He confessed to his crimes and the state of Texas sentenced him to death.

In prison, he quickly alienated all the guards and most of his fellow inmates. One time, when returning to his cell from the exercise yard, he broke away. He climbed the exposed pipes and bars in his cell block, and kicked down the TV sets suspended outside from the bottom tier. Another time, he cut himself hard with a razor because he knew the guard would have to open his cell to keep him from bleeding to death. He just wanted to be able to slug another officer before he passed out. Jonathan Nobles lived his life in deep darkness.

But the light of Jesus Christ was shining in the Ellis Prison at Huntsville, Texas. It was shining in the Catholic priests who ministered there. It was shining in the twelve-step programs that were offered there. It was shining in the words of Pamela Thomas, a British pen pal who wrote letters to him there.

In time, Jonathan Nobles was drawn to that light. Slowly he began to enter it and gradually it penetrated his darkness. He started to change. He became a new man in Jesus Christ.

He was baptized and became a lay member of the Dominican order. He began to minister to other prisoners and became godfather to fellow inmate Cliff Boggess at his baptism. He sought forgiveness from the guards he'd mistreated and gained their deep respect. He forgave and reconciled with his mother. Out of his new relationship with her, she asked him to sing one last song in the moments before his execution.

His last night came, and he lay strapped to a gurney in the execution chamber. He turned to the victims' witnesses and told them, "I know some of you won't believe me, but I am truly sorry for what I have done. I wish that I could undo what happened back then and bring back your loved ones, but I can't." He broke down, sobbing, as he spoke to Mitzi Nalley's mother, "I'm so sorry. I wish I could bring her back to you." And to Ron Ross- "Ron . . . I took so much from you. I'm sorry. I know you probably don't want my love but you have it."

He turned to the witnesses who had come at his request- his aunt Dona, his friend Steve, Pam Thomas who'd become like a second mother to him, and his priest mentors Bishop Carmody, Reverend Lopez, and Father Walsh. He thanked each of them and spoke of his love for them.

He had let the warden know that his last words would be the Bible. He recited all of I Corinthians 13, quoting St. Paul on the excellence of love. He drew from Jesus' final words for his own, "Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit." As the lethal injection began, he finally sang the song his mother had asked for. His second mom, Pam Thomas, said she'd always thought of it as a lullaby, but as Jonathan Nobles sang it in his rich, deep baritone voice it sounded to her like a song of triumph. He sang:

*Silent night, holy night,  
All is calm, all is bright.  
Round yon virgin, mother and child . . .*

At that point, the injection stiffened his body and his voice stopped. *Silent Night* was the last song he sang and it told the story of life. Jesus Christ had entered into his deepest darkness and had changed him, bringing him calm and bright.

Soon we'll sing *Silent Night* by our candlelight and, as we do, I invite us to think of Jonathan Nobles. I invite us to ponder him and those countless other souls down through the ages whose lives, dramatically changed, bear witness to us of the power of Christ's light. Think on him and on them as we sing,

*Silent night, holy night,  
Son of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beams from thy holy face,  
With the dawn of redeeming grace . . .*

With the dawn of redeeming grace, we can turn and face our own deep darkness, whatever it might be. Is there abuse we've suffered that we need to forgive? Is there wrong we've done that we need to have forgiven? Does our wider world's injustice and violence cast a pall over and paralyze us? Does sickness, suffering, or death draw near to strike us down? Is there some favorite self-deception or destructive habit we harbor that keeps us in the dark?

Whatever it might be, tonight we see that we don't have to flee from it or deny it or minimize it because the dawn of redeeming grace is upon us again. Facing our own darkness, we are bold to light our candles for *Jesus Christ is born*. God is completely with us even in our darkest night. Turning to love's pure light, we can change. We can know God's calm and bright. Amen.