



ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Christmas Festival of Lessons and Carols

December 31, 2023



Ministers

Rector

Deacon

Senior Warden

Junior Warden

Minister of Music

Cantor

Administrative Assistant

The People of the Parish

The Rev. Christy Laborda Harris

The Rev. Kate Sefton

Jean Farmer

Meg Nalley

Miles McKenzie

Kristina Ibarra

Jun Kim

Christmas Festival of Lessons and Carols

OPENING HYMN

100 Joy to the World (vss. 1-2, 4)

please stand

BIDDING PRAYER

Dear People of God: In this Christmas Season, let it be our duty and delight to hear once more the message of the Angels, to go to Bethlehem and see the Son of God lying in a manger.

Let us hear and heed in Holy Scripture the story of God's loving purpose from the time of our rebellion against God until the glorious redemption brought to us by God's holy Child Jesus, and let us make this place glad with our carols of praise.

But first, let us pray for the needs of God's whole world, for peace and justice on earth, for the unity and mission of the Church for which he died, and especially for God's Church in our country and in this city.

And because God particularly loves them, let us remember in God's name the poor and helpless, the cold, the hungry and the oppressed, the sick and those who mourn, the lonely and unloved, the aged and little children, as well as all those who do not know and love the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, let us remember before God his Mother, and that whole multitude which no one can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom, in Jesus, we are one for evermore.

And now, to gather up all these petitions, let us pray in the words which Christ himself has taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.**

The Almighty God bless us with grace; Christ give us the joys of everlasting life; and to the fellowship of the citizens above may the King of Angels bring us all. **Amen**

THE LESSONS

please be seated

“What good is it to me that Mary gave birth to the son of God fourteen hundred years ago, and I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my person and my culture and in my times? We are all meant to be mothers of God. God is always needing to be born.”

—*Meister Eckhart*

A READING FROM THE PROPHET ISAIAH (35:1-10)

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,

the desert shall rejoice and blossom;

like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,

and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,

the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the LORD,

the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,

and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

"Be strong, do not fear!"

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,

with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,

and streams in the desert;

Before), might find them breathing there,
Foreknown: the Child bedded in straw,
The mother kneeling over Him,
The husband standing in belief
He scarcely can believe, in light
That lights them from no source we see,
An April morning's light, the air
Around them joyful as a choir.
We stand with one hand on the door,
Looking into another world
That is this world, the pale daylight
Coming just as before, our chores
To do, the cattle all awake,
Our own frozen breath hanging
In front of us; and we are here
As we have never been before,
Sighted as not before, our place
Holy, although we knew it not.

HYMN

101 Away in a Manger

please stand

CHRIST'S HISTORY, AND OURS—*Gustavo Gutiérrez*

please be seated

The Gospel of Luke tells us that “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” (2:1-2) The Gospel of Matthew adds that Jesus was born, “In Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod.” (2:1)

These simple texts convey a profound message: Jesus was born in a particular place at a particular time. He was born under Emperor Octavius, who had himself named Augustus when he reached the pinnacle of power; when Quirinius was governor of Syria; during the reign of Herod, who was traitor to his people and had sold out to the occupying power. It was during this time that Jesus was born, a man of no importance in the eyes of the cynical and arrogant authorities as well as in the eyes of those who disguised cowardice as peace and political realism.

He was born in Bethlehem, “one of the little clans of Judah,” (Micah 5:2) where at his birth he was surrounded by shepherds and their flocks. His parents had come to a stable after vainly

knocking at numerous doors in the town, as the Gospels tell us; we are reminded of the popular Mexican custom of *las posadas*. There, on the fringe of society, the Word became history, contingency, solidarity, and weakness; but we can say, too, that by this becoming, history itself, our history, became Word.

It is often said at Christmas that Jesus is born into every family and every heart. But these “births” must not make us forget the primordial, massive fact that Jesus was born of Mary among a people that at the time were dominated by the greatest empire of the age. If we forget that fact, the birth of Jesus becomes an abstraction, a symbol, a cipher. Apart from its historical coordinates the event loses its meaning. To the eyes of Christians the incarnation is the irruption of God into human history: an incarnation into littleness and service in the midst of overbearing power exercised by the mighty of this world; an irruption that smells of the stable.

The son of God was born into a little people, a nation of little importance by comparison with the great powers of the time. Furthermore, he took flesh among the poor in a marginal area — namely, Galilee; he lived with the poor and emerged from among them to inaugurate a kingdom of love and justice. That is why many have trouble recognizing him. The God who became flesh in Jesus is the hidden God of whom the prophets speak to us. Jesus shows himself to be such precisely in the measure that he is present via those who are the absent, anonymous people of history — those who are not the controllers of history, namely, the mighty, the socially acceptable, “the wise and the learned.” (Matthew 11:25)

Christian faith is a historical faith. God is revealed in Jesus Christ and, through him, in human history and in the least important and poorest sector of those who make it up. Only with this as a starting point is it possible to believe in God. Believers cannot go aside into a kind of dead-end corner of history and watch it go by. It is in the concrete setting and circumstances of our lives that we must learn to believe: under oppression and repression but also amid the struggles and hopes that are alive in present-day Latin America; under dictatorships that sow death among the poor, and under the “democracies” that often deal unjustly with their needs and dreams.

The Lord is not intimidated by the darkness or by the rejection of his own. His light is stronger than all the shadows. If we are to dwell in the tent the son has pitched in our midst, we must enter into our own history here and now, and nourish our hope on the will to life that the poor of our continent are demonstrating. If we do so, we shall experience in our flesh the encounter with the Word who proclaims the kingdom of life.

HYMN

114 "Twas in the Moon of Wintertime

please stand

THE RISK OF BIRTH—*Madeleine L'Engle*

please be seated

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honor & truth were trampled to scorn—
Yet here did the Savior make His home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn—
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

SALUS MUNDI—*Mary Coleridge*

I saw a stable, low and very bare,
A little child in a manger.
The oxen knew him, had him in their care,
To men he was a stranger.
The safety of the world was lying there,
And the world's danger.

HYMN

104 A Stable Lamp is Lighted

please stand

A READING FROM THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN (1:1-5, 14, 18)

please be seated

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

UNTITLED—*Wendell Berry*

The incarnate Word is with us,
is still speaking, is present
always, yet leaves no sign
but everything that is.

HYMN

84 Love Came Down at Christmas

please stand

COLLECT

God of rough hands and hardened feet, giving light to the daughters and sons of earth: in agony of birth and gentleness of newborn skin, may we discover your ordinary beauty in the heart of our longing world; through Jesus Christ, the Icon of the Unseen God. **Amen.**

WHERE THE LIGHT BEGINS - A BLESSING FOR CHRISTMAS—*Jan Richardson*

Perhaps it does not begin.
Perhaps it is always.

Perhaps it takes
a lifetime
to open our eyes,
to learn to see
what has forever
shimmered in front of us—

the luminous line
of the map
in the dark

the vigil flame
in the house
of the heart

the love
so searing
we cannot keep
from singing,
from crying out
in testimony
and praise.

Perhaps this day
will be the mountain
over which
the dawn breaks.

Perhaps we
will turn our face
toward it,
toward what has been
always.

Perhaps
our eyes
will finally open
in ancient recognition,
willingly dazzled,
illuminated at last.

Perhaps this day
the light begins
in us.

BLESSING

May the joy of the angels,
the eagerness of the shepherds,
the perseverance of the wise men,
the obedience of Joseph and Mary,
and the peace of the Christ-child
be yours this Christmas;
and the blessing of God be upon you this day
and remain with you always. **Amen.**

CLOSING HYMN

99 Go Tell it on the Mountain

DISMISSAL

Go in peace and joy. Proclaim the Word made flesh, love incarnate.
Glory, thanks and praise to God.

Poinsettia Dedications

In Memory of her daughter Sheri Ailen
Bonnie Walter-Cuff

In Memory Patricia Sefton
Mary Lou Sefton

In Memory of Richard Rolander
Loria Rolander

In Memory of Susan Malet
The Nalley Family

In Memory of Kenneth C. Brown
Jennifer Badde-Graves

In Memory of Margaret Watts & Mary Anne Buerge
Rod & Mary McAulay

In Memory of David Kerr, Fatima & José Laborda,
Arnold & Marion Harris, and William McConnell
The Laborda Harris Family

In Honor of Nancy A. Hall
In Memory of Marie B. Phillips
Linda Hall & Bill Phillips

In Memory of her husband Vic and her son Curt
Marilyn Metzgar

In Memory of F. W. Johnstone
Priscilla Johnstone

In Gratitude for the work of the Altar Guild
Linda Geiger