

Meditation – Different Yet the Same
Thursday, December 24, 2020
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Springfield, IL

The title of the meditation: Different Yet the Same

Let us pray. As we gather to reflect on this Holy Night, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The year was 1920 in Springfield, Illinois. The pastor of Westminster was the Rev. Dr. Walter R. Cremeans. Miss Gladys Coffin, who worked with Westminster's youth, planned and directed the first Christmas Candle Lighting Service. It took place the Sunday night before Christmas and began at 7:30 p.m. in this sanctuary.

Miss Coffin wrote some years later about the service: "It began very simply – six boys and six girls of high school age lighted a semi-circle of large red candles in the chancel" and was "in a sense a response to the unusual loveliness of the gothic nave within our sanctuary, the chancel, a forest of Christmas trees at Christmas time; a place where beauty, meditation, dignity, and awe come naturally together."

Surely that first Candle Lighting Service in 1920 was a source of solace and joy for those who gathered within these walls, a proud moment for the parents of the participating high school students, a time to remember the mystery and wonder of the Christmas story, and an opportunity to gain perspective beyond what was happening outside these walls.

The world was between the third and fourth wave of the Spanish Flu pandemic which affected 500 million people (one third of the world's population at the time), without a vaccine.

In his book 1920: The Year That Made the Decade Roar, Eric Burns, American author, playwright and broadcaster, highlights 10 life changing events that happened that year. Here are a few of them:

- 1) President Woodrow Wilson established The League of Nations with the hope of everlasting peace two years following the end of the Great War.
- 2) Women gained the right to vote with the ratification of the nineteenth amendment after decades of political advocacy for equality, social justice, and temperance.
- 3) The Ku Klux Klan, a genocidal domestic terrorist organization founded during Reconstruction, was revitalized and terrorized the nation.
- 4) Mass media was born with the birth of the radio. The first commercially-licensed radio station began broadcasting live results of the 1920 presidential election. This transmission of breaking news was unprecedented, and the "talking box" exploded in popularity.

As we consider some of the events and themes of the year 2020, one could say that in many ways our world is "different yet the same."

Tonight's service is "different yet the same," a source of solace and joy for those of us who gather in person or at home in the unusual loveliness of this gothic nave, a proud moment for the parents of the participating high school seniors, a time to remember the mystery and

wonder of the Christmas story, and an opportunity to gain perspective beyond what is happening in the world outside these walls.

Tonight, we walk with Mary and Joseph through the hills and the valleys of their journey to Bethlehem long ago and we affirm the God who entered into the cold and lonely places of our humanity by the backdoor of a stable. What is more, the God who joined us in our humanity, Emmanuel, God with us, also entered into the joys and sorrows of this life, walked the hills and valleys of the VIA DOLOROSA (The Road of Sorrow), and conquered death by dying on a cross.

The God beyond our understanding, who provided a way for Mary and Joseph, is the God who is present with us in the heights, the depths, the hills and the valleys of our journeys. God's everlasting arms will uphold us in the places of our life where joy and sorrow meet.

John Phillip Newell, Celtic teacher and author of spirituality, in his book A New Harmony, shares a vision of Julian of Norwich, in which she realizes

Jesus is handsome, and the "handsome mixture" that she notes in him is "partly sorrow" and "partly joy." His face speaks of a knowledge of life's delight and a knowledge of life's pain. It is not a face that is naïve to the world's sufferings or to the personal experience of sorrow. Nor is it a face that is so overwhelmed by sorrow that it loses its openness and wonder. To be truly handsome, to be truly beautiful, is to reflect in one's countenance both life's glory and life's pain. It is not simply a sweet face, a pretty smile. It is a soul that has experienced the heights and the depths of human life.

By the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and through the hills and the valleys of our lives, different yet the same, may we reflect the countenance, the beauty, and the handsome mixture of one who has journeyed to the place where joy and sorrow meet, and there, has seen the face of the Christ child whose birth we commemorate this Holy, silent night. Amen.