

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

December 29, 2019, The First Sunday After Christmas

Luke 2:1-7, Luke 2:8-20

THE BIRTH OF CHRIST, A GUIDED MEDITATION

The Guided Mediation written by Fr. Thomas Catcci.

There are some stories that need to be told over and over again. The Christmas story of Mary and Joseph, and the Baby Jesus born in the manger is one of those stories.

And sometimes the way we tell the story changes.

This morning not only has the sermon title changed, but the way we are going to experience the story of that Bethlehem birth has also changed in the midst of all that this week has held.

There are many different ways of praying and many different ways of telling Bible Stories and this morning I'm going to invite us to experience the Bethlehem story through something called Guided Meditation. Its been quite a few years since we've done this together, so let me tell you what is going to happen.

This is a way of prayer that asked you to use your imagination. It is an ancient Christian way of experiencing the Bible and of spending time with God. (See St. Ignatius, Imaginative Prayer)

What I will do is invite you to relax and close your eyes and let my words guide you into the story we have heard read from Luke's Gospel. You will be invited to let yourself experience being at the Bethlehem manger with Mary and Joseph and their new son. I am thankful to Father Thomas Catcci who is the author of this Guided Meditation.

Your confirmation class experienced this meditation at their last class and as I told them: There are many different ways of praying, and this is just one of them. If it doesn't work for you, that's alright.

I also told them about Kathleen Norris, an amazing, imaginative Christian author. She said that when she was a child and their teacher would ask them to close their eyes and imagine something that she usually just saw darkness and then into the darkness would appear chicken legs. That was all she could ever see. So, if this meditation isn't working for you, just open your eyes and listen. And don't worry if you see chicken legs; you're in good company with an amazing author.

You'll also notice in the Mediation that the author imagines the stable in a cave. Archaeologists in Bethlehem have discovered house and inns in Bethlehem that were built up against limestone. This rock is easy to carve into, and they have found caves behind those homes and inns. So the stable may have been in a cave. Just don't let this detail distract you from the medication.

Finally, sometimes the other thing that happens with guided meditation is that people relax so much they fall asleep. Unless the person beside you starts snoring, and you realized their breathing has slowed considerably, just let them rest. If they are snorting, please just gently nudge them. Sometimes resting in the presence of God's love is exactly what we need after a hectic, multi-emotioned, Christmas season.

START

As we enter into this guided mediation, I invite you to set down whatever you are holding in your hands. Place your feet flat on the floor.

When you feel ready, go ahead and close your eyes.

And now become aware of your breathing, breathing slowly in, and out.....in and out.

Become aware of the way the floor feels under your feet. Feel the strength of the pew supporting you. Feel it against your back and your legs.,

Continue pay attention to your breathing, breathing slowly in, and out.....in and out.

Now pay attention to the sounds in this room and outside the church as you continue to pay attention to your breathing; breathing slowly in and slowly out.

As you continue to pay attention to your breathing

“...We pray: Lord Jesus Christ...

Be with us as we meditate... Guide us in our prayer... For we trust in you... And in your Holy Spirit directing our thoughts and our dreams to discovering you in our lives... Be with us Lord... Guide us in peace... Surround us with your Holy Spirit, Stay near... Be near...Amen.

With your eyes still closed... (Imagine) Travel(ing) past the sunset... Into the darkness of a winter in ancient Israel... Gliding over a huge desert...you can see a large cliff ahead of you... Come to rest on that cliff...overlooking the desert... You are alone... And very safe... And nothing can harm you...

The heat of the desert has cooled... It's winter...but still warm... Feel how pleasantly comfortable you are...

Look around you... Ahead of you is the vast expansive desert... Outlined in moonlight... If you look with care...the darkness of the night is broken with a slight flow at the horizon...the final curtain of the day... Breathe deeply...notice how clean the air is...how clear...how sweet... Overhead you can see a multitude of stars...so many stars

As if you are standing in the middle of...and yet beneath...all the constellations... Clusters of stars twinkle and blink above you...

Turn around and see the most wondrous gathering of stars imaginable... There...to your right... A star that seems brighter than the rest...near the horizon... As if four or five stars cluster together... An incredibly bright mark in the sky... One or two stars in the cluster...seem to hang a little lower than the others... As if pointing to the earth... Pointing to someplace in the desert... They blink...they pulse...as if they want you to notice something special...

You search... Leaving the cliff...lifting up from the ground...gliding toward those bright stars on the horizon... Follow your instinct...follow your curiosity...follow the star... Look down and notice a few tents huddled beneath you...on that plateau...and their campfires...flickering...glowing... Continue to fly...toward the outskirts of the city up ahead... A city with thick and heavy walls... An ancient city with many narrow ~~dirty~~ streets...with flickering torches...in the doorways... Passing a large building...you can hear voices and the noise of people eating and drinking... You can hear laughter...and singing... And it's crowded...too crowded... Continue on... Gliding over the furthest city wall...back to the quiet... To the countryside...

Up ahead...a ridge of small hills... Then coming nearer, you see openings...the entrances to caves... One seems to glow...lit with a large campfire at the entrance... And above...the star cluster seems to point here... As if you were standing directly beneath the tail of the star... Rest here a

moment...outside the cave...

Look around... Listen...hear the muffled sounds of sheep...bedding down for the night...content. Walk through the flock... They part quickly...making a path for you... Up ahead...several men sit and lean close to the opening of the cave... Two are bald...with white beards... There are a couple of younger men... And three young boys...just children... They all wear soft, warm animal hides...sandals...they carry wineskins and long staffs... They turn and look at you...silently... And they smile...their faces almost glow with wonder...with joy... A wonderful thing has happened... God has done something great here...now...and you are part of it... The shepherds seem proud...happy... And they step back, out of your way...as if they had been expecting you... Is there anything you want to say to them?... Anything you want to do? ...Take a moment.

They point toward the entrance of the cave... You approach...slowly...enter...and look around... There are cows, a few goats, a donkey... Everything is hushed...even the animals...so satisfied...so still... Beneath you...there is soft straw to walk on...dry...clean...crisp... Step closer...into the light... There are two figures...resting...beside the flickering fire...

You can feel the warmth of the fire on your face... A woman holds a bundled baby sleeping quietly... The husband looks so proud of his wife and newborn... He turns to you...to welcome you...to lead you...to the mother and the baby... Is there anything you want to say to Joseph ~~him~~?... Anything you want to do?...Take a moment.

The mother leans against a thick pile of straw... She holds the child close to her...cradled in her arms and wrapped in tattered strips of cloth... Then she looks up into your eyes and smiles... She is so very proud... She lifts the cover from his face so you can see... The baby...beautiful...happy...blinks...smiles... And something deep within you knows that God has been born into the world... Here...now...God has become human...become just like you... God has been born...a new baby...

The light from the fire seems to make his face glow...so bright... Then the mother invites you to come closer... She raises her arms...offering the child to you... She slides the new born baby into your waiting arms... You can feel the warmth...the softness...the movement of gentle new life... Life... The life of God...in your arms...fragile and alive...and so real... Is there anything you want to say?... Anything you would like to do?...Take a moment.

And the mother explains that she has been asked...by God...to take care of Jesus... She is to care for him...until he is old enough to be given to the world... To protect him...nurture him...and to love him... But she needs your help... Can you?...Can you help care for this child of God?... Can you help God grow?...Can you care for him with love?... Is there anything you would like to say?... Anything you would like to do?...Take a moment.

Mary gently...carefully...takes the baby back into her arms... She tells you that you also have God...within you... And God must grow there too... Your task is to bring God to the world as well... And she can help you with that...

Mary asks if God can use your hands to help others... She takes your hands...kisses them softly...making your hands holy... Then she asks if God can use your ears to hear the cry of others... Then she gently kisses your ears...anointing them... She asks if God can use your heart to love others... And she ~~softly touches your heart with her kiss to~~ looks into your eyes and gives you her

blessing to consecrate your heart to God... She hugs you in her arms with the infant baby... And thanks you...

She nods to you...and you now know...that within you...rests Jesus... Ready to grow... Ready to use your hands... To use your ears... And to love others with your heart...Christ's heart...

Be at peace... Know that God will always remain within you... And will never leave... God will always love others through you... Know how sacred you are... Feel the loving heart of God within you... And be at peace... And rest...

Think of all you've seen... All you've heard... And all you've felt... And know that God is ready within you... In your hands, your arms, your heart... And you can bring him to others so they will know God too... He is within... Within...

When you're ready to leave Israel...and come back here... Know that God is still with you...and will never leave... You are not alone... There are so many people who need you... And need God... Now come back here... And be at peace..."

<https://www.avemariapress.com/engagingfaith/2012/11/advent-meditation-birth-christ/>
Written by Fr. Thomas Catcci, "Advent Meditation: The Birth of Christ"

Slowly become aware of your breathing again, breathing slowly in and slowly out.

Now pay attention to the sounds in this room and outside the church as you continue to pay attention to your breathing; breathing slowly in and slowly out.

Become aware of your feet flat on the floor, Feel the strength of the pew supporting you. Feel it against your back and your legs., as you continue to breath slowly in and slowly out.

When you feel ready, go ahead and open your eyes, and take a moment to look around you, to settle back into this sanctuary and this time and place.

Take a moment to "just quietly think about what you've experienced...
And be at peace... (be at) Peace."

Amen.