

WHAT GIFT CAN WE BRING?

The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church
Choir service December 14, 2008

PRELUDE *In the Bleak Midwinter*

ANTHEM *Once Again, It's Christmas*

WELCOME

CHILDREN'S CHALICE

DEDICATION OF CHILDREN

Caelin Angela Donovan

born May 8, 2008 to John and Karen Donovan

Lucas Theodore Michailof

born Aug. 14, 2008 to David and Sarah Michailof

Phyllis: In the familiar words of Sophia Lyons, the pioneering religious educator of our tradition, "Each night a child is born is a holy night. @ The birth of all children is special, is holy. Today, we celebrate two special children whose lives are just beginning to unfold. Who knows what changes they will experience in their lifetimes? Who knows what joy, what hope, what love, they themselves will bring to this world?"

Today, we as their families and their religious community, dedicate ourselves to them, committing ourselves to raise them by our example, to provide them a safe place where they can bring their questions, their joys and their fears, and help them develop an ethical and spiritual foundation for their lives.

Carla: But it is also a time when we, as a church community, add our own commitment to that of the parents. No family can or should stand on its own. We hope our church will be a place of connection, of trust, and of love for children and adults alike B "all ages," as we often sayCin times of joy as well as sorrow. Let us celebrate the children.

John: Walter Dean Myers counsels those of us charged with the care of children in these words:[1]

Let us spin mysteries for their minds and wonders for their hearts.

Let us bring love and sing love and ring garlands of love around them.

Let us make holidays and days of praise and words that raise them to the heavens.
Let us celebrate each child as best, most adored,
Most surely blessed.

Let us turn them to the moon and stars and name them glorious and wonderful,
wonderful and forever glorious.

Let us hear the questions in their tears, and let us hear them with our hearts.

In the beginning let us celebrate the children and bring them peace.

Then let us speak love to them, and love again,

In every waking breath
Let us celebrate the children.

Phyllis: Today we are dedicating two children who are here along with other members of their families. I would like to invite John and Karen Donovan, and Sarah and David Michailof, and their families to step forward.

Karen and John, Sarah and David, you bring your children here today with all of your hopes and dreams for their lives ahead. You have brought your children into this world and it is to you they will turn for love and guidance. It is not by your words so much as by your deeds that they will be mold ed. Do you pledge yourselves to raise your children lovingly, teaching them by your own example, courage, dedication, compassion, integrity and reverence for all that is holy?

(Parents: We do.)

Carla: Allison, you are older than your brother, and you know things he hasn't learned yet, you can do things he can't manage yet.

I charge you to be patient with him,
protect him from harm,

include him in your play,
and hug him every night
so that you will remain friends forever.

Sometimes it will be hard to do all this,
but do you promise to try?

John: We turn now to you, the whole congregation. You are these children's wider family and spiritual community. We are gathered to bless Caelan and Lucas with our prayers and good wishes. We dedicate ourselves now to watch over them as they grow up, listening for their laughter and tears, so that someone they can trust is always near. We offer them our arms, our shoulders and our laps, so that love, joy, and understanding will embrace them.

We offer them both freedom and limits, so that guides await on rugged paths. We offer them all that we have learned, all that we believe and all of the questions we still have not answered. And when it comes time, we will bless them when the only need they may still have of us remains our continuing love.

I therefore ask you now, do you freely offer your blessing and commitment to Lucas and Caelin? (Congregation: WE DO.)

Carla: Today, we formally name these children in their religious home, recognizing that each is unique in all the world. The names given to children are part of what makes them unique.

John and Karen, tell us about the name of Caelan and a bit about who she is. **[Parents do so.]**

Sarah and David, tell us about Lucas and a bit about who he is.

Sarah: Lucas is named for my grandfather, Harry Lucas Minnemeyer. My grandfather was kind and loving, with a fabulous sense of humor. He loved to dance; a hobby he took up when he was in his eighties, and he loved to meet new people and get to know them. He had a love for life that I hope will be embraced by Lucas.

Lucas's middle name comes from Theodore Roosevelt whom we admire because he was a great conservationist and avid outdoorsman of great drive and determination. We hope these qualities will define Lucas's life as he grows into adulthood.

Phyllis: Roses are the traditional symbol of love. White roses also symbolize purity and innocence. The roses we use in this ceremony come as a gift of the earth, nurtured by sun, water and soil, as well as the diligent gardener. We may plant the seed, but we do not create it. We may cut the buds, but we cannot force them to flower.

Caelan Angela Donovan [Lucas Theodore Michailof], I offer you this blessing:

[Touching head] May you seek wisdom and understanding

[Touching lips] May you speak with courage, integrity and love.

[Touching heart] May you give and receive love.

[Touching hands] May you bless the world

Now the families have each asked someone to offer a blessing:

Pat Tompkins (blessing Caelan): What a privilege it is to be part of this special ceremony. Caelan, my heart is filled with love and happiness as I help to welcome you - officially - into our Paint Branch family. This is truly one of the best moments in our church life and for me, is a wonderful continuation of a special relationship that was forged years ago when your mother was part of my Youth Group. They were great years for me as a very remarkable set of young people shared their thoughts, their energy, their acceptance and love with me. That special relationship has continued and now includes your dad - John. I danced and toasted at their wedding. I jumped with joy when I found out you were going to join us. I have stopped for chats with you around Greenbelt Lake. And, I have cheered for the dedication and care both your mom and dad are bringing to their roles as teachers.

Caelan, life is filled with many wonders - it is an adventure beyond compare. We will find ourselves moving in the circles of our lives - touching in different ways at different times. Today, as we share this special moment, your new life reminds us of the greatest joys we can know - to love and be loved - to be cared for and about - and to have eager companions on this journey we call life.

Welcome to our Paint Branch family, Caelan.

Sarah Michailof (blessing Lucas): Lucas, your first four months of life have given us a tremendous amount of joy. We've marveled over each new development -- the first crooked little smile which has blossomed into a full-faced grin that makes your eyes sparkle; your first coo which has turned into fantastic babbles of conversation; your intent watchfulness of your big sister as she shows you how to play.

We look forward to the years ahead as you grow into boyhood and manhood. We promise to provide you with love and guidance, and share with you a variety of life experiences to help you appreciate and embrace the diversity of opportunities that life has to offer you.

We hope that you will be guided by a love of life, compassion and respect for others, curiosity and appreciation of the diverse world around you, as well as determination and grit to meet life's opportunities and challenges.

John: Finally, to all the extended family of Caelan and of Lucas, in this season when we remember that all things are possible, may a holy star shine in your lives, lighting your way. Blessed be your children. May they bring joy and peace wherever they go. Amen.

ANTHEM May All the Children

SINGAWAY HYMN #409 Sleep, My Child
Children are invited to leave on the last stanza

CALL TO WORSHIP

For so the children come
and so they have been coming,
Always in the same way they came
Born of the seed of man and woman.

No angels herald their beginnings.
No prophets predict their future courses.
No wise men see a star to show where to find
the babe that will save humankind.
Yet each night a child is born is a holy night.

Fathers and mothers
sitting beside their children's cribs
Feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning.
They ask, Where and how will this new life end?
Or will it ever end?

Each night a child is born is a holy night
a time for singing
A time for wondering
A time for worshiping.

Come, let us worship together.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

FLAMING CHALICE DEDICATION

HYMN #238 Within the Shining of a Star

FIRST STORY The Sacrifice

The Christmas season is replete with wonderful stories. Here's one told by Aney B. Chatterton, in a collection called Christmas Miracles.

The year was 1932 and the nation's economy was at an all-time low. . . . I was in the eighth grade, and we all started school that fall with few clothes and school supplies. There was no lunch program, and for many students there was no food to bring. So [we] shared whatever we had.

As Christmas approached that year . . . [w]e knew there would be very little for any of us. But there was one desire we all had, though none of us would have mentioned it to our parents. A new sled had appeared on the market called the Flexible Flyer. With its sleek finish, sharp runners, and smooth handlebars that steered it easily and gracefully, it was the Rolls-Royce of all sleds.

We all marched to the hardware store one day after school to see the new wonder sled. How much are the sleighs, Mr. Evans? one of the boys asked.

Well, he replied, I think I can sell them for four dollars and ninety-eight cents. Our hearts sank. But that didn't stop us from dreaming the impossible dream. . . .

I awoke early Christmas morning but was not eager to get up. My mother finally called, so I dressed and we all went to the living room. . . . There, underneath the tree, with a big red ribbon tied around it, was a shiny new sled – a Flexible Flyer!

I let out a startled cry and dropped to the floor, sliding my fingers along the satiny finish, moving the handlebars back and forth, and finally cradling the precious sled in my arms. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I looked up at my parents and asked, Where did you get the money for it?

My mother wiped away a tear with the corner of her apron and replied, Surely you believe in Santa Claus. . . .

After our midday Christmas dinner, Mother announced, Put on your boots and bundle up warm. We're going to town. We have another surprise for you. I didn't think anything could compare with the surprise I already had.

Dad hitched up the team to our big sleigh, I loaded in my new sled, and we went to town. As soon as we crossed the bridge, I saw what the surprise was. Kids were everywhere, and so were Flexible Flyers. Main Street had been roped off so that we could start at the top of the hill and glide all the way down across the bridge without danger from cars.

The entire community had turned out. Boys and girls were all jumping up and down, some were crying, most were throwing their arms around each other and shouting, You got one, too?

. . . Three farmers with their horses and sleighs . . . [took] turns pulling us to the top of the hill. The older boys went first, running and then flopping belly first, as we called it, onto their sleds. . . . We all took turns

As night drew near, our parents called for us to stop; it was time to return home for chores. No, no, we cried. Please let us stay. Reluctantly they agreed, releasing us from chores for this one time only. When they returned it was dark, but the moon shone brightly, lighting the hill. The cold wind blew over our bodies; the stars seemed so brilliant and close, the hill dark and shadowy as we made our last run for the day. Cold and hungry, but happy, we loaded our Flexible Flyers and returned home with memories that would last a lifetime.

Everywhere I went in the days that followed, my Flexible flyer went with me. One night I decided to go to the barn, as I often did, just to watch Dad at work. I noticed that one of the stalls was empty. Where=s Rosie? I asked. She isn't in her stall.

There was an awkward silence, and my dad finally replied, AWe had to sell her. She cut her foot on the fence.

Sell Rosie? I thought. Gentle, friendly Rosie?

But the cut would have healed, I said, AWhy didn't you sell Meanie? She never does anything we want, but Rosie always leads the herd into the barn.

Dad didn't say anything, and suddenly I knew. Rosie had been sold to buy my Flexible Flyer. She was the best and would bring more money; and my parents had given the best they had for me. . . . I ran from the barn in tears and hid myself behind the haystack.

. . . [T]he next day [I] told my best friend about Rosie. Yes, I know, she said. My dad took ten bushels of apples from our cellar and took them to Pocatello and sold them door to door. He's never had to do that before. That's how I got my Flexible Flyer.

. . . Little by little we began to put the pieces together. Everyone had a similar story to tell. Then we began to realize how the entire community had united in one monumental effort of sharing, trading, peddling, extra working, and, most of all, caring, to buy the Flexible Flyers. None of us ever had the slightest hint of what was going on right under our noses. This had to be the best-kept secret of all time in so small a community. . . .

Many years later . . . I asked my mother how they had managed to keep that secret, and who started it. Her eyes twinkled. She gave me one of those warm, loving smiles that only a mother can give and replied, My dear daughter, you must never stop believing in Santa Claus.

ANTHEM *En Belen tocan a fuego (Bells in Bethlehem)*

SECOND STORY *The Lionel Train*

Dan Rodricks is a much-loved columnist for the Baltimore Sun. He writes about local subjects. I found this story in an undated clipping which speaks about his own family experience.

He tells us that his father, Joe, was a Portuguese immigrant whose own father had died while Joe was still a boy. Joe had to forego an education so he could go to work to support the family. He took a job in a small-town foundry in Woonsocket, R.I. Eventually, with some partners who pooled all their savings, he bought it.

He spent his life, Dan writes, in dirty khakis and steel-toed boots, sweating with the rest of the men, his lungs filled with fumes. Then, one October day in 1963, when Dan was nine, the foundry burned to the ground uninsured. His father came home. His only words were, No more foundry.@ He disappeared into the bedroom. That was the only time I ever saw Joe Rodricks . . . cry, Dan wrote.

There never had been much income. Now there was none. Dan's mother went out to work. She took a minimum wage job, assembling parts in an electronics plant. In early December, his father went into the hospital with emphysema. The family expected him to die. He seemed to have lost his will to live. Rodricks continues the story in these words:

[Christmas] that year is remembered for the darkness in which it ended the destruction of the foundry, and my father's absence from our house, the loss of life's simple rhythms, and all the fears that visit a kid when his family seems adrift in loss and uncertainty. . . . I knew why there was no tree in the living room that year. I was 9, but I understood.

And yet, the next morning, when we arose, there was a white pine in our house, fully decorated . . . and glowing beneath it the only gift my little brother and I would share that day: an electric Lionel engine with one car, on a track with no straight pieces. It hummed and rattled, round and round and round, monotonously and beautifully. The engine was yellow. The one piece it hauled was a green cattle car that had a unique see-saw mechanism inside. As the train moved, a western outlaw with a cowboy hat, bandanna and six-shooter popped his head through one end of the cattle car roof and, alternately, a sheriff figurine did likewise at the other end. . . .

My mother . . . had found a last-minute way to surprise us. My brother and I lay on the rug and watched the train go around the track a thousand times, the heads of the sheriff and the outlaw popping up and dropping down. In all the years since then, no gift has ever meant as much. . . .

[We grew older, he continues, and eventually that train set went into a box in the basement.] Years later, [I tried] fruitlessly to determine the train set's whereabouts. . . .

And then 12 days ago in Baltimore, a man named Ralph Fisher approached me with a wrapped gift. Fisher had never met me, but he had heard this story from a friend. . . .

Fisher, an avid collector of trains with a large display in his . . . home, had never seen the [green cattle car with the popping heads] but he set about to find one.

He succeeded, too B at a model train show in Timonium a couple of weeks ago. In all the shows I've been through over the years, I had never seen one, and there it was, he said. A collector from New York had one.@

And in its original orange box B Lionel's No. 3077, the green animated sheriff and outlaw car. I held it in my hands, clicked the gear underneath that made the heads pop up and down. It transported me, in the next instant, to that one and only remarkable Christmas, when my mother brought light to darkness. When I finished sobbing, I offered to pay Ralph Fisher for the car and the memory. No, he said. It's a gift.

ANTHEM

Sister Mary Had But One Child

SERMON

What Gift Can We Bring?

"It's a gift," said Dan Rodricks' friend. "It's a gift." That's

what Christmas can be for us, if we will let it: a gift. We may be Jewish. We may be Christian. We may be secular. We may be Wiccan. We will experience Christmas in different ways but what they all have in common, if we will open ourselves to it, is that Christmas comes to us as a gift.

It's the gift of hope. Hope renewed. Hope alive again in our hearts. And hope given.

Where does the hope come from? Hope comes to us when we are enabled once again to see the world through the eyes of a child, eyes of trust and faith. Or to put it more traditional language, when we are enabled once again to see that God is not dead: To see that God the possibility of love lives on in every child that is born even in you and me, if we can let ourselves once again see the world through the eyes of childhood trust.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." (Mk. 10:14) But his life and his message were not addressed to children, they were for everyone. They were about enabling grown men and women, you and me, to see the world afresh; to see, as through the eyes of childhood simplicity and trust, *that there is another way of living, the way of compassion and respect and love of the stranger as our neighbor.*

What is the real Christmas message? That this alternative world that is the *real* world, for it surrounds us, just waiting to be discovered in unexpected places. The real message of Christmas is that we have the power of love within us, just waiting to emerge in ways we had thought impossible.

At this Christmas season, may we find the gift of love, all around us, and within our hearts, waiting to be shared. And with it, may we find the gift of hope, and the promise of new life.

HYMN #123 Spirit of Life

OFFERING

Offertory music B John Lagerquist, *flute*

CLOSING WORDS (*A. Powell Davies*)

Let us open our hearts to Christmas. Open them to all the hope that stands against a world that wastes with evil things; open them wide enough for gentleness in a world that is bitter and harsh; for loveliness in a world that is desolate; for faith and its joy, and the song of its joy, that sings in the presence of God.

CHORAL

[1] Walter Dean Myers, "The Village," in *Glorious Angels* (excerpts)