

“Holding the Light” Christmas Eve 2006
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA)
The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey

TEXT: Luke 2:1-20

TAIZE is an ecumenical community in France, about 240 southeast of Paris. Centered around regular sung prayer, self-supporting work, and social justice activism, this tiny corner of a Burgundy village has become a destination of world pilgrimage. Tens of thousands of visitors, particularly young people, have sensed that reconciliation between nations and churches is being lived out in practice. Appalled by denominational wars, and aghast at divisions between rich and poor, Taizé’s name is synonymous with peace, reconciliation, communion, solidarity with the poor. Every form of injustice or neglect was cause for grief, and prayer.

On Tuesday August 16, 2005, during the evening prayer service, amidst a crowd of 2500 young pilgrims, a mentally disturbed woman violently attacked the Community’s founder, Brother Roger. His throat was cut, causing him to bleed to death within minutes.

From the beginning, Taizé was a community of light, a place of light in darkness. In 1940, Roger Schultz rode a bicycle from Geneva to a small town in unoccupied France, just beyond the line of demarcation to the zone occupied by German troops. For two years Brother Roger hid Jewish refugees before being forced to leave France. In 1944, he returned to Taizé to found the Community,

Roger saw Taizé as a place where “kindness of heart would be a matter of practical experience, and where love would be at the heart of all things.” Taizé’s visitors always included some who were making a last attempt to find something positive in the churches. Roger would listen to them far into the night, in the church, or one of his brothers would take the visitor out on to the hillside to watch the sun set and the lights come on across the valley. The night sky gave perspective: light appeared in the darkness.

In the week after Roger’s death, his successor Brother Alois became the animator of the community. And he prayed for forgiveness for the deranged woman. Then, in answer to the question, “what now?”, he said, “We can do nothing else but hold the Light. We will continue to hold the Light.”

This is exactly what we are called to do tonight. Christmas is a time for holding the Light. Tonight we have a chance, an opportunity, and adventure, to once again birth the Babe, cradle the newborn, and hold the Light.

Alexander Papaderos knew how to do this. He grew up near the village of Gonia on a rocky bay of the island of Crete. Here, near the small airstrip at Maleme, Nazi paratroopers invaded Crete and were attacked by peasants wielding kitchen knives and hay scythes. The retribution was terrible. The populations of whole villages were lined up and shot for assaulting Hitler's finest troops. High above the institute is a cemetery with a single cross marking the mass grave of Cretan partisans. And across the bay on yet another hill is the regimented burial ground of the Nazi paratroopers. The memorials are so placed that all might see and never forget. Hate was the only weapon the Cretans had at the end, and it was a weapon many vowed never to give up. Never ever.

Against this heavy curtain of history, in this place where the stone of hatred is hard and thick, Papaderos came to believe that the Germans and the Cretans had much to give one another--much to learn from one another; they had an example to set. For if they could forgive each other and construct a creative relationship, then any peoples could also learn to co-exist. Thus, next to a Greek Orthodox monastery, in his home town, he created an institute devoted to healing the wounds of war --a conference ground on the site of horror. And, in fact, it did become, and remains, a source of productive interaction between the two countries. Books have been written on the dreams that were realized by what people gave to people in this place.

Papaderos took on the same mission the Taizé community pledges: peace among nations. And his journey began with a mirror.

When he was a small child, during the war, he found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked on that road. He kept the largest piece. By scratching it on a stone, he made it round. He began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that he could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine--in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. As he grew, he began to understand that this was not just a child's game but a metaphor for what one might do with one's life. He came to understand that as he put it, I am not the light or the source of light. But light--truth, understanding, knowledge--is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I hold it and reflect it."

The Christmas story, the one that is told in the fairy-tale language of faith, is not just that God is, but that God comes – God comes here, in great humility – that God in Christ came to us, and came for us... that God entered the circumstances of our human existence in order to lift us up as a mother comforts a newborn babe. In the darkest season of the northern year, this story reminds us that God gets personally involved in this world. God did not simply line up on the side of the powerful for a share of the spoils. God intervened as a helpless infant.

Most of us feel helpless when world events threaten us, when responsibilities overwhelm us, when bureaucracies and corporations brush us aside like crumbs off a tablecloth. But a baby in a manger was more helpless than any adult. Therefore, the story reassures us, there's hope for us too.

Take a moment now, and imagine you are holding an infant baby, cradling the newborn in your arms.. Look at the curling fingers, the down on the head, the smooth skin. Smell the fresh new-baby scent. Look at the eyelashes and the tiny fingernails. Think of his or her future, the potential, the promise. Now see this babe surrounded in Light. This is what the new Christ Child asks of us. Hold the Light. For now, simply hold the Light, believing in the promise, hoping in the future, trusting in God's grace and goodness. May it be so.