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**President's Remarks  
Festival of Lessons and Carols  
December 2, 2012**



**David L. Parkyn, President**

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The first chapter in Luke's gospel is a long, winding preamble, a passage of both prophecy and praise. But then Luke gets down to business and it takes him only 20 short verses to introduce a decree from Emperor Augustus, a journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the birth of a baby, and an announcement that startles shepherds in the middle of the night and sends them rushing off to find "the child lying in the manger." That's pretty much it in these 20 verses, except for one small thing. Almost as an afterthought, Luke notes that Mary "ponders" all of this in her heart.

The oral tradition which frames the beginning of all Scripture in Genesis is strikingly similar to Luke's second chapter. It takes just 30 verses or so to cover the whole of creation—light introduced where there had been only darkness, water on previously dry land which gives birth to plants with vegetables and fruit, animals who live on the plants, birds who fly in the air, fish who swim in the seas, and finally people created in God's likeness. That's pretty much it in these 30 verses, except for one small thing. Almost as an afterthought, the oral tradition notes that when the creation was finished God stopped and rested.

I'm intrigued by both of these afterthoughts. Why stop? Why ponder? Why not keep creating? Why not just start raising the little one?

Luke doesn't answer my questions, but the tradition recorded in Genesis does. And since these are both creation stories, perhaps what is true for one might be true for the other as well.

Earlier this year I read a book by Judith Shulevitz, a short work she titles *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time*. Near the end of her book she asks, then answers, my question:

Consider the mystery surrounding God's first Sabbath. Why did God stop, anyway? . . . God stopped to show us that what we create becomes meaningful only once we stop creating it and start remembering why it was worth creating in the first place.

Here we have it. Why did God choose to rest on the seventh day of creation? To hallow it; to claim the act of creation as holy, and to claim as holy all that had been created.

Why did Mary choose to stop after the birth of Jesus and the visit by the shepherds? I think for the very same reason: to hallow the birth; to claim the birth of this infant as holy, and to claim as holy all births of boys and girls before this time, and forever after.

Shulevitz ends her book with a penetrating single sentence, one well-worth committing to memory and then acting on. She writes.

We have to remember to stop because we have to stop to remember.

I'm inclined to quibble with her use of stop; perhaps "pause" is a better word; or ponder. Yet stop is more forceful, a more conscious act, and so perhaps Shulevitz is right. We have to stop.

This points us to why we have gathered for this evening together; and to why starting today we light a candle at the beginning of each week for four consecutive weeks of Advent.

We have to stop.

To stop to remember.

To stop to ponder.

To stop in order to make holy.

On this night we stop, ever so briefly, to mark life as holy. And if we follow God's pattern in Scripture's opening oral tradition and Mary's practice in the early gospel account, then over the days and nights of the coming four weeks we will often stop, to ponder, to make holy.

- When we light a single candle or a thousand lights on a family tree, we stop to declare holy darkness transformed by light.
- When we sign a Christmas card, or open a card received, we stop to declare holy the gift of friendship.
- When we gather a few coins or wrap a bill tightly, and with the sound of a bell ringing we drop them through the slot in the top of the red pot, we stop to declare holy the breath of life of a person in deep need.

Some of you were with us just five weeks ago when we broke ground for a wonderful new building on our campus. That day, when I spoke with our trustees just a couple of hours prior to the groundbreaking, I pondered with them this ideal of a Sabbath stop. I told them this was a day of divine stopping. And because you made that day possible

with your gifts to Campaign North Park we welcomed many of you to campus on that glorious day just five weeks ago. We welcomed you to stop with us.

In groundbreaking for The Johnson Center we gathered to declare holy

- . . . the generous gifts of many given to Campaign North Park
- . . . the creativity of architects and the skill of builders
- . . . the razing of three-flats on Christiana Avenue to make room for a new building
- . . . the temporary disruption of the central campus green
- . . . the study of science, the preparation for careers, the service of others, the sharing of food, the meeting of friends—all which will happen time and again, year after year, in this new building.

How do we declare such things as these to be holy? By stopping, by breaking ground, by pausing to remember.

This is a holy time at North Park, and I say this with the deepest reverence.

- Why did God choose to stop on the seventh day of creation? To hallow it; to claim the act of creation as holy, and to claim as holy all that had been created.
- Why did Mary choose to stop after the birth of Jesus and the visit by the shepherds? To hallow the birth; to claim the birth of this infant as holy, and to claim as holy all births of boys and girls before this time, and forever after.
- Just days before writing their final exams for this fall semester, why have our students chosen this night to stop and make music? To hallow their life as students; to claim as holy the act of learning.
- Why do you stop from time to time to write a check and make a gift to this school? To mark as holy the preparation of students for lives of significance and service.

God has filled the world and our campus with beauty. May we open our eyes to behold God's gracious hand among us. May we learn to serve God with gladness, and declare as holy the generous labor of God's people in this place.

This has been a sacred night to experience the wonder of God's love, a night to ponder, a night to declare holy. And now a night to return from whence we have come, glorifying and praising God for everything we have heard and seen.

Amen.