

Dick: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God.

And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

*[First reader goes into the pulpit]*

Dick: Hope guides life. Without hope, we find ourselves pushed downward into depression, and many people in our world function at some level of depression. Selfish hopes that are small and petty lure us into wasting our lives on things that neither satisfy us nor endure. Selfish hopes that are big and ambitious drive us to become cruel to other people and callous toward their needs. To live with commitment and purpose, looking beyond the pleasure or pain of the moment, we need hope, but all hopes are not good for us. Jesus brought us hope for the kind of world and human community for which God created us. His hopes bring us together and lead us toward the better world of justice and compassion he called “the kingdom of God.”

Connie: Jesus tells us to seek first and foremost the kingdom of God and God’s way of living together, and then all the things we need will be given to us with their rightful value. No longer will our possessions possess us; no longer will our fears and anxieties drive us; no longer will our shortcoming or misfortunes overwhelm us. We light the first candle for hope because Jesus gives us the promises of God.

*[Light the first Advent Candle]*

Dick: God's peace is neither the order imposed by power that stifles protest nor the serenity of self-centeredness that shuts out the world. God's peace is shalom: healing and wholeness for each person and harmony among people and all God's creation. In God's shalom, justice is done because people can no longer tolerate injustices done to others. Never again will life be each one for himself or herself or each group for itself no matter what happens to others. No longer will the earth be ravaged and despoiled without regard for its life and beauty. No more will we poison each other's wells or impoverish each other's lives. We light the second candle for that peace which is God's shalom.

Yvonne: But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

*[Light the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent Candle]*

Dick: Joy comes when the promise is kept, the wrong set right, the frustration overcome, the wound healed, the sorrow taken away. Joy also gets deep down inside us as we learn to trust God's love, even when life turns difficult and painful. We light the third Advent candle for joy. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; live in my love . . . so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

Melissa: Joy comes when we discover how very much we matter to God. The Lord GOD says, "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. Turn, then, and live." Jesus tells us there is great joy for God when a person turns back to God's love to find forgiveness and healing.

When a disappointed John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he really was, after all, the one sent by God, Jesus replied: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." We light the third candle for joy.

*[Light the third Advent Candle]*

Dick: All our hope, joy, and peace come from one source: God's great and faithful love. This world matters because God loves it, and people have worth beyond measure because God loves all of us. Love overcomes anger and estrangement. We light the fourth Advent candle for love.

Jim: In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son to give himself for our sins. Jesus says, "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another." We light the fourth candle for God's one true motive and purpose, the source of our life, hope, and salvation: God's faithful love. "For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you."

*[Light the fourth Advent Candle]*

Dick: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish and be lost but may have live that endures forever. God sent Jesus to us, not condemn the world, but so that through him world would be saved from ultimately meaningless death and destruction.

Bill: Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Simon answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." We light the center candle for faith in God's Messiah, the Christ of our hope and salvation.

*[Light the Center Candle]*

\*HYMN NO. 40

"Joy to the World"

Dick: The story is not complete with the coming of the Christ into our world. At the dedication of the infant Jesus, Simeon tells Joseph and Mary their son is destined to be rejected. People took offense at him and wanted to get rid of him. Jesus told his disciples he had to go to Jerusalem and endure great suffering, be killed, and then be raised by God. They did not understand. Next we shall hear the voices of his rejection and extinguish the candles because humanity loved the darkness more than the light.

*[Reader 6 steps into the pulpit]*

Emily: I was in the synagogue on the Sabbath when Jesus healed the old woman who was all bent over. On the Sabbath! I wouldn't have minded his healing her some other time if he thought he had to, but why on the Sabbath? She'd been bent over for years; she could have waited another day. Jesus is just a bleeding heart showing off his great compassion for the riffraff in the crowds.

*[Put out the first Advent Candle] {Rear lights out}*

Deb: If, as this Jesus says, God loves sinners and forgives them, why should anyone bother to obey the commandments and do what is right? He rewards people who don't deserve it, and I say that's wrong! Just look at the kind of people he eats with and imagines he's teaching. You can't teach such people anything. Just tell them what to do and make them do it. I say the man is known by the company he keeps.

*[Put out the second Advent Candle] {Half of the center lights out}*

Annie: He had the nerve to call us "blind guides" and "whitewashed tombs" – clean on the outside and full of rotteness inside. I've had it with this guy, Jesus. "Hypocrites," he calls us — phonies, pretenders! We stand up for God's laws, and he puts us down for it. He says the commandments, even the Sabbath itself, were made for the people, not the people for the commandments. Something has to be done about him. Too many of the ignorant are following him, eager to hear that God loves them as they are, in their disgusting conditions. If we don't do something about him, there's going to be trouble.

*[Put out the third Advent Candle] {Other half of the center lights out}*

Jon: I am Pontius Pilate. Yes, it's true, as people say, that I knew Jesus was no rebel leader, but those who hated him said he was. I realized they were liars, but I also knew Emperor Tiberius was no tolerant man, and I had already been in trouble with him. He demanded accountability, and I would be blamed for another disturbance in Jerusalem, even if there was no way I could prevent it. Besides, Jesus wouldn't speak in his own defense; so what was I to do? I did what had to be done: I got rid of the problem. That was my job. So, another Jew got crucified, so what? I sleep at night, most of the time.

*[Put out the fourth Advent Candle] {Half the front lights out}*

Ken: I am a centurion, and my detail drew the dirty job of crucifying three rebels, one of them the popular would-be king named Jesus. I've seen men crucified before, and it's not pretty. They scream and curse as the pain increases. But he actually asked his god to forgive the people who nailed him up there. I'd never heard that before. He did cry out, of course – they all do. But he was different somehow. Anyway, he's dead, and I have to make my report.

*[Put out the Center Candle] {The remaining front lights out}*

Dick: On the Hill of the Skull outside Jerusalem, Jesus suffered and died. The light of life went out. But he gave himself to suffering, humiliation, and death because God was not willing to give up on us. He died because God loves this world. Love could not win by overpowering us. Jesus could win for God only by giving himself for us.

*[After a few moments of silence, Dick reads again, and Abby goes up to the candles behind the Communion table to get a light, then returns and relights the center candle. Then she moves to the pulpit to read.]*

Dick: Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So, she ran and got Simon Peter and another disciple who went to see for themselves.

Abby: I thought he was the gardener. I was crying and could barely see through my tears. But when he spoke my name, I knew him. It couldn't be Jesus, but it was. He was dead; I saw him die with my own eyes. But there he stood calling me by name, "Mary." He was alive! "My Teacher!" I cried. He sent me to tell the others.

Dick: Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. No one lights a lamp, then puts it under a basket. Let your light shine so people will see" the good that comes from what you do, learn what grace is, and give glory to your Father in heaven. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Amen.

HYMN NO. 60 "Silent Night! Holy Night!"

*[Abby and Connie go down the center aisle passing the light, then remain in the rear of the sanctuary.]*

*{After the Benediction, some of the lights should be turned back on so people can see to leave.}*