

St. Paul's Advent Devotional 2022

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Mt. Lebanon, PA



“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” -John 1:9

Dear People of St. Paul's,

Welcome to the Advent Devotional 2022! This year we have looked to the cherished Advent tradition of the Advent wreath for inspiration for our reflections. The four candles on the wreath represent hope, peace, joy and love. We reflect on these virtues as we light the candles each week each week which also represents light increasing as we prepare for the light of the world, Jesus, to be born on Christmas Day. And similarly, each week of this devotional will focus on one of these four themes. We hope this devotional will serve as a helpful companion in this season of anticipation!

The art featured in this Devotional is created by an Anglican priest in Aotearoa, The Rev'd Sarah West. We are grateful that she has allowed us to use her work in this devotional! She makes weekly prints inspired by our scripture, check them out at visiolectio.com.

In Christ,

Laura Di Panfilo

Associate Rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Mt. Lebanon

Ken Matheny has been a member of St. Paul's since November 2019. He is involved in centering prayer, Stephen Ministry, the prison letter-writing ministry, two book discussion groups, the Pickwick boys, and is a greeter at the 8 a.m. services.

The Reverend Laura Di Panfilo is the Associate Rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Mt. Lebanon, Pa. When she is not at church, she can be found teaching yoga or walking her pug with her husband and nine month old daughter.

Kathleen Davies Hendricks has attended St. Paul's since 1999. In those years, she has sung with the Chancel Choir, delivered flowers, read prayers and lessons, served on Vestry, and taught Confirmation class. She is the mother of a former acolyte and Praise Band member and the wife of an occasional volunteer chef. She believes that writing is a form of meditation and that writing about a topic helps you to explore what you really think and feel.

Frank Horrigan has been a parishioner at St. Paul's for about 25 years. He serves on the Vestry, and is on the Outreach and Stewardship Commissions. He is also teaching a Confirmation class this year.

WE LIGHT THE CANDLE OF HOPE: ADVENT 1



Sunday November 27

offered by Ken Matheny

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:5)

“The light has come!” A few months ago, I read a beautiful exposition of the Gospel of John by British theologian, Lesslie Newbiggin. Rev. Newbiggin chose for the title of his book *The Light Has Come*. In four words Newbiggin summed up the joyous message of the Gospel of John: the light of the world is coming, and the world will never be the same. During Advent we wait for the light. We wait in hope, which is the theme of the first week of Advent.

The light came in an age of darkness when the Romans brutally oppressed and exploited a vast empire from Gaul to North Africa. The light came during the reign of Caesar Augustus and Rome’s puppet King Herod. The light came during a time of cruelty, brutality, and economic domination. It was a time of darkness, but the light that was to overcome the darkness forever was coming, and it was coming in an unlikely backwater of the Roman Empire. The light was brought into this world by a poor, teenage girl, who, it turns out, was mightier than Caesar.

Our theme this week is hope, symbolized by the first candle on our Advent wreath. But what kind of hope, and for whom? I want to explore those questions by meditating on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in the context of Advent. I also want to meditate on the opening chapters of the Gospel of John because they give perhaps the most profound insight to what the light of hope ultimately is: a light for all of creation. In John, we read that the light that is coming is the light through whom “all things were made” (1:3). The light that we await is the light that permeates the universe.

I'd like to close this first meditation with what I believe is an important message for us in the 21st Century. The light that is coming loves our miraculous planet, every creature, every drop of water, every tree. We live in a time when our actions threaten God's world. Our planet is heating up. Plastic chokes our oceans, and entire species are disappearing forever. These are daunting problems, but we must never despair. This is a season of hope, and we can with God's help heal our ailing planet. And we will because the light is coming.

Dear God, you have entrusted this beautiful planet to us. Through the love of the one through whom all things were made, teach us to care for it wisely.

Monday November 28

offered by Ken Matheny

"We have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:2)

In recent years, doctors have reported an alarming increase in deaths of despair, death as a result of suicide, alcoholism, and drug abuse. In this season of hope, we must stand in solidarity with those who feel hopeless. The light is coming, but many of us feel separated from God, the source of hope.

Many of those who heard Jesus' Sermon on the Mount must have felt hopeless. Jesus stood in solidarity with them. He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3). Blessed? How can that be? The Old Testament provides an answer. "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

Many of our fellow humans are crushed in spirit. I once was. When I was 28 years old, I experienced my first major depressive episode. I was in total darkness. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't read. I couldn't work. I couldn't pray. Everything seemed hopeless. People who have suffered severe depression often say that it is truly hell because one feels abandoned by God. It took over a year, but finally my doctor found the right medication to lift me out of hell. I was lucky because not everyone responds to medication. (I might also add at this point that it would have been so helpful to have a Stephen Minister during these dark times. I needed more than just medicine, I needed someone who cared enough to listen to me).

So, about this star the wise men saw. What's that got to do with my story? In my hometown there is a VA Hospital that puts a star on top of the hospital during the Christmas season. On the hills that surround the town, the star can be seen for miles. When I was a boy, seeing that star shine above the hospital in the distance filled me with such excitement that I called it "my star." Every year on Christmas Eve I would take a walk to a hill that gave me an unobstructed view of my star. On Christmas Eve, 1983, I was just beginning to escape the darkness that had been my life for over a year. I felt well enough to walk to my usual place to see my star. And there it was, my Christmas star shining on top of the hospital just as it always has (and still does) every

year. Then, I felt something that I thought I would never feel again. Hope. My star shone in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it.

Dear God, we pray for all who suffer from mental illness. Help us to be the light of hope this Advent for a person who has lost hope.

Tuesday November 29

offered by Ken Matheny

“And a sword will pierce through your own soul also.” (Luke 2:35)

Simeon was a righteous and devout man and one of The Bible’s most inspiring examples of hope. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Christ. We don’t know how long he waited, but he trusted God and saw the Lord on the day of His purification. Simeon rejoiced, but he also had a warning for Mary: a sword will pierce her heart.

However, the light is coming for those who mourn, the light of eternal life. Indeed, those who mourn are blessed (Matthew 5:4).

Simeon departed in peace because his eyes had seen his salvation (Luke 2:30). Luke doesn’t tell us Mary’s reaction to Simeon’s warning, but we know that Simeon is right. The child she is holding will die an agonizing death on the cross. Mary’s suffering must have felt as if a sword had pierced her soul.

In February 1982 a truck driver ran through a stop sign and struck my little sister’s car as she was on her way to work. She died. She was 23 years old and was five months pregnant with a little boy who also died. I can’t think of any words to describe my parents’ agony, so I won’t try. However, if there is any suffering greater than that of grieving parents, I can’t imagine it.

God was with my parents in their suffering. As is usually the case, God worked through a human being to bring hope to my mom and dad. The pastor of our Methodist church in West Virginia visited my parents’ home many times in the weeks after my sister’s death. I will never forget him. He said little but listened with compassion as my parents tried to find words for their grief. There was no need for our minister to say anything because he was there for us. At the end of each visit, he prayed with us. At that time, I was an agnostic. However, as I watched our minister’s tender caring for my parents, I remember thinking, “If this is what Christianity looks like, then I will always be a Christian.”

Through His death and resurrection, the infant whose birth we await brought us eternal life. Blessed are those who mourn, for the light of eternal life is coming.

Dear God, as another year is about to end, we remember those who are no longer with us. But, as Simeon understood, the light of eternal life is coming. “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?”

Wednesday November 30

offered by Ken Matheny

“He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.” (Luke 1:48)

“Blessed are the meek” (Matthew 5:5). I have often wondered what Jesus meant by “the meek.” My guess is that He is talking about the powerless because the people he was addressing were certainly powerless, living under Roman domination. But the light is coming for the powerless, the meek. The powerful already have their reward; the powerless will inherit the earth. The light is coming for the poor, the homeless, the immigrant in a strange land, and for all of those who live at the margins of our wealthy society.

I believe that Jesus was clearly a dangerous man, a revolutionary. He was a peaceful revolutionary, but history shows us that the peaceful revolutionaries are the most dangerous. They can bring empires to their knees. The earthly powers that crucified Jesus understood quite clearly that Jesus’ teachings were subversive.

The Bible itself is a dangerous book. Jesus’ teachings are rooted in the Old Testament, which emphasizes over and over that our God is a God of justice. She is a God who cares about the widow, the orphaned, the oppressed. She insists on justice in a world where the powerful can buy justice while the poor are locked up and forgotten. The prophet Micah summed up succinctly the teachings of the prophets: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). People who do these things change the world.

Like her Son, Mary was a peaceful revolutionary. Mary praises God because God “has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree.” (Luke 1:52). And there’s more: God has “filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away” (Luke 1:53). A revolutionary--like mother, like Son.

I worry that we want a God who makes us feel comfortable, a God who doesn’t tamper with the status quo. But God didn’t become man to tell us that we’re doing great and to keep up the good work. God became man to give hope to the powerless, to turn the status quo on its head.

I don’t believe God became man to wage class warfare or to push a political agenda. God loves everyone, including the rich and powerful, but the light that is coming has a special love for “the meek.” How appropriate it is that His mother will not be a queen, but one of “low estate.”

Dear God, wake us from our complacency and teach us to “to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly” with You, our God.

Thursday December 1

offered by Ken Matheny

“And Mary said, ‘Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.’” (Luke 1:38)

With Mary's consent, the light of the world is coming. Although the light is coming for us all, Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, tells us that this is a season of hope for those who most need hope. The light is coming for the poor, for those who mourn, and for the meek. They are blessed. Also among the blessed are those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6).

What is righteousness? St. Paul tells us that the righteous person is one who lives in faith (Romans 1:17). We cannot make ourselves righteous; only God can do that. In yesterday's meditation I characterized Jesus and Mary as peaceful revolutionaries. But God's love for humanity is truly radical. It turns everything upside down. God offers us the greatest of all gifts—forgiveness and righteousness. As Paul wrote, it is through grace that we receive "the free gift of righteousness" (Romans 5:17). We need only to accept the gift through faith. This is the most powerful, liberating truth in Scripture. Without grace, the burden of my sins would crush me into despair. Through God's grace, I live in hope.

So, who in the story of Jesus' birth is the example of perfect faith and, therefore, perfect righteousness? I believe the answer is Mary, the teenaged mother of God. When the angel of the Lord appeared to this girl and announced that through her, a Son would be born who would be a king and whose kingdom would endure forever, Mary was afraid. However, fear did not conquer. Faith did. Mary, like Abraham in the Old Testament, trusted God. She was righteous because of her faith.

Jesus' promise to those who hunger for righteousness was fulfilled in His crucifixion and resurrection, which filled the universe with the light of grace. Advent is a season of hope for all who sin and "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Dear God, we thank you that through the faith of Mary and the obedience of your Son, You have washed away our sins and made us righteous.

Friday December 2

offered by Ken Matheny

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is well pleased." (Luke 2:14)

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God." (Matthew 5:9)

The light is coming for the peacemakers! The multitude of angels who appeared to the shepherds conveyed God's peace to us. However, we seem very far away from the peace the angels proclaimed. Why? Part of the answer is that we don't trust Jesus. We think his teachings are merely inspiring ideals, unrealistic and other-worldly. When we turn Jesus' teachings into ideals that can never be realistically attained, we make his teachings irrelevant.

For most of my life, I wondered if Jesus was serious about many of his teachings. Love my enemies? Pray for those who persecute me? Turn the other cheek? None of that sounded realistic when I was young. But I have changed my mind. In Luke, Jesus asks his disciples "Why do you call me Lord, and not do what I tell you?" Luke 6:46. Great

question! If Jesus is my Lord, then why do I not do what He has told me to do? Before we dismiss Jesus' teachings as a collection of impossible ideals, we should consider this: if everyone on earth followed Jesus' teachings, life on earth would be paradise. Following the teachings of Jesus is the only realistic path to peace on earth. Jesus was no dreamer. He was a realist.

Jesus had a higher opinion of us than we do. I believe that Jesus was the most hopeful and optimistic person ever to walk on our planet. Jesus was not asking us to do the impossible. He believed in the intrinsic goodness of each of us. He believed that we truly can love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and turn the other cheek. The Son of God believes in us because He knows that we were created good. He knows that we can have peace on earth because God dwells inside each of us. So, perhaps the biggest problem we have is we don't believe in ourselves. God believes in us, and because God believes in us, we cannot fail. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus showed us the way. We must follow it. The light of hope is coming for women and men with whom God is pleased. If we follow this light, there *will* be peace on earth.

Lord, help us to do what you have told us to do. Make us instruments of your peace.

Saturday December 3

offered by Ken

Matheny

"But to all who received him . . . he gave power to become children of God." (John 1:12)

I've been writing about whom the light of hope is coming for, but I left someone out. The light is coming for me! Jesus is coming for me!

So, who is this Jesus? When I was a child, my Sunday School teachers influenced me more than they could possibly know. They taught me that Jesus was the kindest, most compassionate, most loving person who ever lived. The Jesus I grew up with, and who was always with me, had a smile on his face that revealed the gentleness of His nature. He loved children. He loved me.

When I was a far-too-serious college student, I decided that I had become too "sophisticated" for a Sunday School Jesus. I wanted to know who the historical Jesus was. So, I read many books about Jesus and the New Testament to discover who Jesus was. I studied Jesus, you might say, as one might study math or science. He was a problem to be solved.

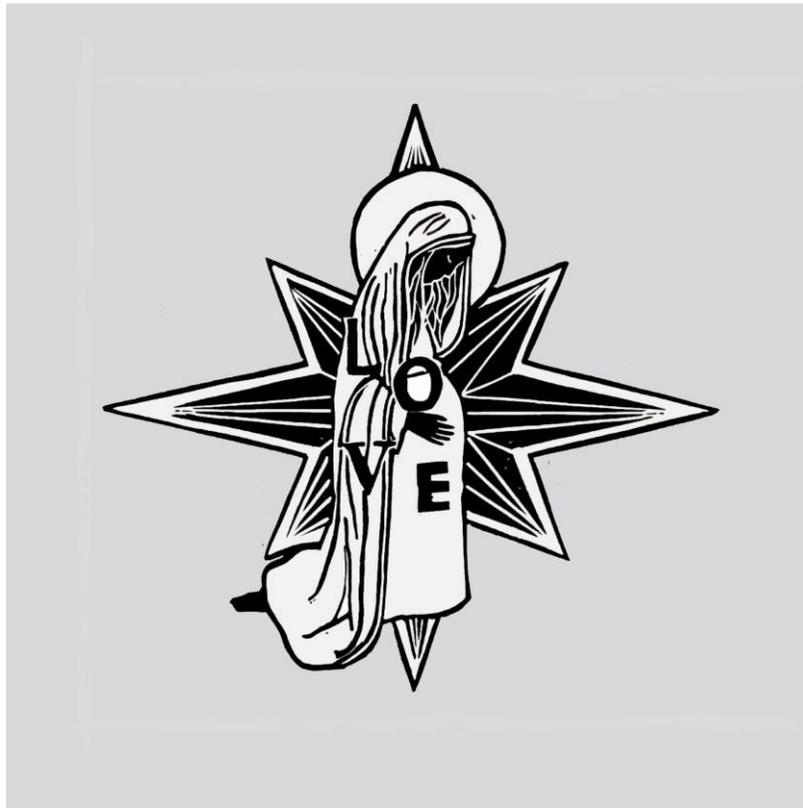
But after decades of studying Jesus, I still didn't know who Jesus was. Something about my approach was wrong. I remember to this day something a philosophy professor I admired in college said: If you come across a question you can't answer, ask a better question.

For all those years I had been asking the wrong question. Instead of asking who was Jesus, I should have been asking who *is* Jesus. Specifically, who is Jesus for me?

One Sunday, before the 8 a.m. service in the chapel at St. Paul's, I pondered a painting that I had seen before but never thought much about. It's a painting of the Jesus my Sunday School teachers introduced me to, a smiling Jesus holding a lamb and a boy on His lap. It is a painting of a kind, compassionate, loving man, a friend to children and to all of us living in what can be a frightening world. I realized that the Jesus in the painting is *my* Jesus. The kind, compassionate, loving friend I knew as a child is the same Jesus that I believe in today. He is the Son of God who is coming to make us all children of God—me, you, and all who will open their hearts and receive Him. The light of hope is coming for you and for me, and the darkness will never overcome it.

Dear God, help us to become like little children so that we might enter the kingdom of heaven where you will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more mourning, crying, or pain. (Revelation 21:4)

WE LIGHT THE CANDLE OF LOVE: ADVENT 2



Sunday December 4

offered by Laura Di Panfilo

“But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel,

which means, 'God is with us.' (Matthew 1:20-23)

Advent derives from the Latin word for “coming” or “arrival.” In this season we expectantly wait for Christ to come. My family has a beautiful nativity set from Italy. Growing up I always looked forward to setting it up in Advent, removing the baby Jesus from the bale of hay, and hiding him in the back of the bookshelf until Christmas Eve when he was born. It is easy for many of us to imagine waiting for the birth of Christ as we have visited this story many times over the years.

But Advent is not simply a reenactment of something that happened a long time ago. We celebrate the incarnation of Christ because once Jesus was born into the world the world was changed forever. We know that after Jesus’ death and ascension, he remained with us through his teachings and his Spirit. Even though the birth of Christ was a one-time event, Jesus remains present to us today. The story of Christ coming to us is still unfolding in our lives. Christmas is not a memorial service or just a story we reenact in our pageant, it is a story we live each and every day when we follow the teachings of Jesus.

It is so hard to know God; what a large and abstract task! To help us better understand the love of God, we are sent the Son to show us how to faithfully live into this love. Jesus is called “Emmanuel” in his birth story, which we are told translates to “God is with us.” God was with Mary and Joseph in the birth of Jesus, and God is with us today. This Advent, what does it mean for you to have Emmanuel- Christ with you? Where is Jesus moving you to love this Advent?

*We thank you for the way you revealed yourself to us in the birth of your son, God.
Help us be present to the ways that Jesus is moving in our lives today.*

Monday December 5

offered by Laura Di Panfilo

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17)

Even if you have never picked up a Bible, you have probably heard John 3:16 in American culture. This verse is often printed on the bottom of shopping bags or written on signs held up in stadiums. To many, this verse is a perfect summary of what many people believe about God: following God is a form of fire insurance, a guarantee that you will not go to hell. John 3:16 is often used to evangelize as if reading it will inspire people to follow Jesus because wouldn’t they want to avoid hell too? I have never heard a story of someone reading this verse and suddenly following God and I am

not convinced that printing it in public places is the best way to share the love of God with other people either.

Over the years I have moved away from focusing on John 3:16 and have found the verse that follows it, John 3:17 to be a critical verse in understanding Christ's love for us. John 3:17 reads, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him." In this verse, we learn that Jesus did not come to condemn but to save. The love of God did not enter the world to punish but rather, to bring life. This second verse does not weaponize the love of God to try to coerce people into following God. It simply states that God's nature is to love, and this love transforms us. In this Advent as we reflect on the love of God that entered the world, how might we share this love with others who might not have heard of God's love in this way before? How does it change your understanding of God to think of God as one who saves, not one who condemns?

Jesus, we thank you that your love was made flesh in order to bring us life and not death. Help us to live into this life this Advent season and share this message with a world that is hungry for such love.

Tuesday December 6

offered by Laura Di Panfilo

"When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:34-40)

I will admit that I was sorely disappointed in receiving "love" as we were divvying up the themes of Advent for this Advent Devotional. Every time I explained my misfortune over receiving this theme to other people they teased me. Why am I so opposed to love, is my heart made of ice?

I think my disappointment with getting love as my theme is that I find it so hard to write about it in a way that does not sound cliché. Love is one of those words thrown around so often that it has lost meaning. And yet, we are told that God is love and that we must love one another. What does this actually mean?

When Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is he replies, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment." When Jesus is asked what is the most important thing a follower of God can do, he says that it is love. And then he tells us

how we must love God: with all our hearts, soul, and mind. Essentially, we have to love God with everything we got!

And so how do we love God with our hearts, souls, and minds? Well, it looks different for each of us as we all have different hearts, souls, and minds. God has given us gifts, whether they be things we care about, things that make our soul sing, and things we like to think about. It is to understand that all good things come from God, and so we ought to use these gifts for God.

Evelyn Underhill writes, “Advent makes us look for God in all those places we have, until now, ignored.” What if we changed this to say, “Advent makes us love God in all those places we have, until now, ignored”? How can we love God anew this Advent? What would this look like for your heart, mind and soul?

God we thank you for your son, who guides us in perfect love and teaches us how to love. We pray that you would show us how to emulate this love this Advent season.

Wednesday December 7

offered by Laura Di Panfilo

GOD LOVES YOU... NO EXCEPTIONS!

When driving down Washington Road you will pass St. Paul’s electronic sign. Orange bulbs radiate our service times in one moment, and then the message “God Loves you... No Exceptions!” the next. This statement can be found all over our church and for some, is part of the story of what brought them here. The sign is moving because it reminds us of what is central to the message of God: love. And not just any type of love, but a type of love that is not limited, finite, or even earned.

Many of us have known religious communities that tried to limit the love of God. God only loved you if you acted a certain way, looked a certain way, or believed a certain thing. God’s love was conditional and required you to be or do something in order to receive that love. This type of love is often used to exclude people and punish them for their behavior or nature. This understanding of love has been weaponized against people.

And so our sign is actually a radical statement about the love of God. The Episcopal Church speaks about this phrase this way, “We have a legacy of inclusion, aspiring to tell and exemplify God’s love for every human being; women and men serve as bishops, priests, and deacons in our church. Laypeople and clergy cooperate as leaders at all levels of our church. Leadership is a gift from God, and can be expressed by all people in our church, regardless of sexual identity or orientation.” One way we understand the love of God is to say that God’s love empowers us in ways that are inclusionary, not exclusionary. We invite and celebrate the lives and leadership of people who many Christians have tried to exclude. Jesus' life and ministry was constantly drawing those

who society pushed to the margins in closer to God, and so as Christians we seek to follow in his example and love without exceptions!

God of love, we thank you that your love goes places we are not always willing to go ourselves. Embolden us to follow your example and love who you love without exceptions.

Thursday December 8

offered by Laura Di Panfilo

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Before Jesus’ death, his followers became anxious at the thought of him no longer being there with them. How would they go on without their teacher and friend? What would life look like without him? They had many questions and could not imagine life without Jesus.

Right before Jesus is handed over for death he has his last meal with his disciples. And there he washes the feet of his friends and tells them to love one another. By washing their feet, he gives them a beautiful image of what love ought to look like. I have several friends who get pedicures before their church’s Maundy Thursday services. I would be lying if I said I had never done the same! There is nothing wrong with this, but it probably only further removes us from the reality Jesus faced when he washed his disciples’ feet. They probably traveled around in sandals, often by foot. Most of us shower daily, and our feet are kept in shoes all day. Even though we might find foot washing strange, our feet are most often not very dirty. But the feet Jesus washed were probably filthy! Motivated by love, Jesus was moved to wash his friends’ feet. I imagine the action as one that was tender, meaningful, and also a little stinky.

Jesus tells his disciples, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” If we want to be known as people who follow Jesus, we will have to be known as people who are willing to get into some stinky situations for his love. Love is often sentimental, but if we think about true love we know that it requires something of us. Love cannot remain a thought or a warm fuzzy feeling. Love must move us to action, or else it means nothing.

We know God loves us because God has moved in history, time and time again. This is ultimately the Advent message: love comes to us! And in the coming of love, we are invited to share this love with others.

Jesus, we thank you that you taught us how to love through your life. We pray that we would listen to the ways you are calling us to love this Advent.

Friday December 9

offered by Laura Di Panfilo

“Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1-2).

I know this is an Advent Devotional and we are focusing on the incarnation of Christ, of God-made flesh, but I want to share my favorite scripture on love in this entry. It is found in the same scene I shared in my previous entry.

We read this scripture from John in our Maundy Thursday service, a time when we celebrate Eucharist together, then strip the altar in preparation for Good Friday and Jesus’s journey to the cross. One of the final acts of love Jesus does for his friends, some of which would soon betray him, is one of love. He washes their feet.

The line “he loved them to the end” always brings a tear to my eye. There is such an intimacy of love revealed by Jesus here. Jesus knew his friends would let him down, and yet he does not allow his heart to be hardened by this disappointment and continues in his love for them. When I think about the type of love I want to emulate, this is it.

For my first mother’s day, my husband Luke gave me a book that reimagines Augustine’s *Confessions* as written by a mother. In *Motherhood: A Confession* by Natalie Carnes reflects on Augustine’s struggles with love. She notes that when Augustine lost a friend, his mourning led him to lament that love often leads to suffering. Carnes reflects on Augustine’s struggle with love in a letter to her daughter:

The way you love a human being, daughter, is the way Christ loves her: all the way through suffering. For Christ suffers, not to eradicate the possibility of our suffering here and now, but to show us the way suffering accompanies love in this world, and the way love survives such suffering as love, rather than turning into violence. My attempts to give too much to you, to take away your pain, or to absorb the suffering of the world so that you will not see it— these can be attempts at playing God in a way that God does not even play God. God does not clear the world of suffering for us. God wants us to survive suffering without being defeated by it; that is what I want to help you to do, too.”

Christ’s suffering leads him to love. As his followers, we are invited to do the same. Jesus knows that suffering is not the end of the story and that ultimately God triumphs over death. This means that suffering should not be a barrier to our love. That the hardships of this life might challenge us, but they do not have to destroy our love and our capacity to love. It is easy to look at the state of things and become jaded. But Jesus looked at the state of the world and instead turned to love.

Life is full of challenges and despite this, Jesus invites us to love one another until the end. This also means that Jesus loves us to the end too. That nothing we can do can separate us from his love. Jesus is generous and forgiving to us just as he was his first disciples and friends. We are so fortunate to know this love in Jesus! What a blessing to receive it through the birth of Christ this Advent.

Jesus we thank you that you loved us from the beginning and until the end. We pray that you would turn our suffering into love as it is your nature to turn death into life.

Saturday December 10

offered by Laura Di Panfilo

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13)

Weddings at St. Paul’s are joyful occasions of love and celebration. One of the readings that is often selected by the couple to be read in their service is this famous passage from 1 Corinthians 13. I always smile when a couple selects this scripture for their wedding because after the famous verses talking about “love” this passage includes my favorite verse in the entire Bible. 1 Corinthians 13:12 reads, “ For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

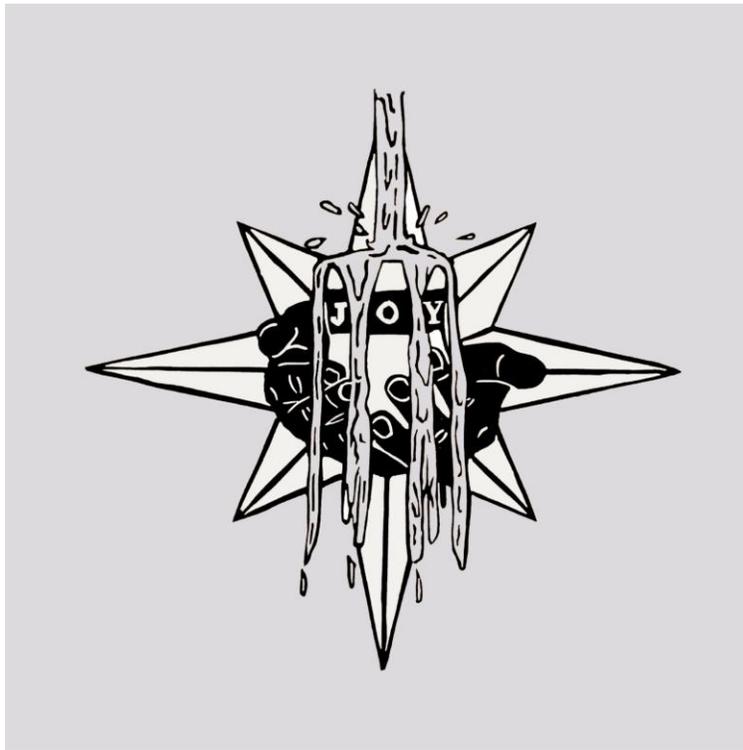
I am captivated by this verse for many reasons. I am drawn to the image of a dim mirror that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians. To me, this dim mirror represents the partial knowledge we have of God in this life. We try to know God through prayer, reading scripture, Bible Study, etc. but ultimately, we cannot get a complete picture of God. Some days this excites me and other days it frustrates me. But I find a lot of hope in knowing that “then we will see face to face.” That one day, all of my questions about God will be answered and I will be face to face with my creator.

The verse continues, “Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” We are told we will fully know God one day, just as we are fully known now. This is a line that brings me great hope, and also great comfort. Yes I will someday know God fully, but it also says that I am fully known right now. The creator of the universe knows each and every one of us, intimately and completely. We worship a God who is fully present to our lives, every joy and every sorrow, and everything in between.

The passage concludes, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Love is the greatest gift from God and the greatest thing we can share with the world in order to share God with others. This is important to remember at weddings, but just as important to remember all other days too.

Jesus we thank you for the opportunities you give us to love one another and we thank you that these relationships of love remind us of your love for us. We thank you that you fully know and love us, help us to increase in love for you this Advent season.

WE LIGHT THE CANDLE OF JOY: ADVENT 3



Sunday, December 11

offered by Kathleen Davies Hendricks

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:11)

For two weeks now, we have lit candles and placed them in a wreath, counting down the days until, in the words of the carol, “The dark night wakes, the glory breaks, and Christmas comes once more.” Those two candles, and the one that will be lit next week, are purple. That shadowed, regal color is meant to symbolize repentance, preparation, reflection, a wintry mirror of the solemn colors of Lent. Today, however, we light a pink candle for Gaudete Sunday, the candle of joy. The brightness seems almost incongruous in this sober season, like a chorus of “Happy Birthday” in the middle of a Gregorian chant. Sure, in the secular world, the lead-up to Christmas seems to be a time of frenetic celebration, a whirl of parties and spending. Within the Church, however, the ideas of joy and Advent exist in a kind of tension. We think of joy as fulfillment: the open door with the beloved on the other side, the unwrapped box containing the anticipated gift. Advent, meanwhile, is all about the “meanwhile”: wondering if you will ever see your beloved, wondering if you will get what you really want.

We need this reminder, though, in the midst of our preparations. This week that recognizes and honors joy, does a couple of things: first, it provides a way station, a respite in the midst of penance. It anticipates the happy ending of Christ’s birth. Second, this Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, acknowledges that joy can sit alongside sadness and contemplation. Angela Gorrell, a theologian of joy, distinguishes between joy and happiness. Happiness, she argues, comes from a sense that things are going well while joy “has a mysterious capacity to be felt alongside sorrow and even — sometimes, most especially — in the midst of suffering.” Further, Dr. Gorrell proposes that there are three distinct kinds of joy: retrospective joy, which we feel when we “imagine in our minds an occasion when we helped someone else, or someone unexpectedly helped us”; resurrection joy, which we feel when we see “things that are broken getting repaired”; and futuristic joy, which overwhelms us when we “glimpse meaning, beauty, or goodness.” The joy of Advent allows us to drink deeply from these waters: we can look back over thousands of years at Christmases past, at the annual return and reminder of God’s promise; we bear witness to how this promise is continually renewed; and we can anticipate the beauty and goodness of this holy season.

God of promise, God of fulfillment, help us to balance penitence and celebration as we walk through this season. Help us to recognize that joy can exist alongside sorrow and that we can find meaning in searching for Your joy.

Monday, December 12
Hendricks

offered by Kathleen Davies

“When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” (Matthew 11:2-3)

I remember Christmas as a child, watching wrapped packages pile up under the tree. I would stare at their shapes, trying to decipher what was inside. (Touching and shaking the boxes was strictly off limits.) Would I get what I wanted? I couldn't tell, but I knew that eventually, I could tear off the paper, cast aside the bows, and satisfy my curiosity. I would know that all the waiting had been worth it.

When we meet John in the third chapter of Matthew, he is preaching and baptizing, begging people to repent, assuring them that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He is a figure of profound faith, his entire life shaped by the confidence that he is meant to prepare the way for the Messiah. The son of a priest, he chooses to live in the wilderness, forgoing the comfort that he could expect as his birthright and embracing asceticism. His entire life looks like a tribute to the rigors of belief. His faith is so profound that he has no trouble speaking truth to power – he confronts the Judean king, Herod, about his relationship with his brother's widow... and that is why, eight chapters later, he is in prison, staring down his own death. John is willing to take a stand, to die for his beliefs, but at the beginning of Matthew 11, he seems to be having a crisis of faith. Under the circumstances, who wouldn't? John may be lonely, in pain, suffering, but at the end of his life, he does not focus on deprivation or physical misery. Rather, he is plagued by one doubt – is Jesus the promised savior or is deliverance to be postponed yet again? He wonders, "Did I get it right? Was I part of something greater than myself, or was I mistaken?" He does not know if he made the right choice and, confined to the dank dark of Herod's prison, he will never know how the story ends. So, he sends word to Jesus, pleading for comfort and confirmation. But Jesus does not reassure John about who he is; instead, he tells John what he does. His words do not comfort; instead, they contain a hint of reproof as he lists the miracles that he has brought about. (The first ten chapters of Matthew are a treasure trove of healing and wisdom; not only does Jesus preach the sermon known as the Beatitudes, but he also heals the blind, the leprous, and the paralyzed and brings a dead child back to life.) Perhaps John, imprisoned, is not aware of these wonders...or perhaps Jesus chides him for not paying attention, for seeking an overt declaration rather than noticing Jesus' deeds. Jesus could resolve this so easily; he could say, "Yes, of course, I'm exactly who you've been waiting for," but he doesn't. He doesn't open the box and hand John the present. Or perhaps he tells John that the box is already open, its shining contents available for him to see and know and enjoy. "You know," Jesus tells him, "You know already." Joy is available, if only we have the faith to access it.

God of assurance, God of healing, help us to have the faith to recognize You. Help us to receive, and to give, the good news of Your kingdom.

Tuesday, December 13

offered by Kathleen Davies Hendricks

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,

*the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.*

*The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.”
(Isaiah 35:1)*

I am driving north through the high desert. The landscape seems lunar, with hills rolling away under a punishing sun in unvarying shades of gray and brown. The world outside my car windows is harsh, barren. Anything that grows here now has shallow roots and can be torn away by the wind. My eyes, accustomed to the greens of the Pennsylvania woods, shy away from the sight. Without rain, all this light and heat can be oppressive. As a Pittsburgher, I'm used to complaining about rain. I moan about toting an umbrella everywhere. I complain about wet shoes and damp socks. I lament the damp and the gloom. On average, Pittsburgh gets more than 140 days of rain each year, so rain is a nuisance or at least, an unremarkable constant. I take our rain-washed greens for granted. Here in the desert though, rain means something else. Water is relief, water is life. The people who live here treat water as a precious commodity, measuring showers and lawncare drop by drop. Every year, though, this land blossoms, turning briefly into a crazy quilt of wildflower color. For a few bright days, the earth looks like a celebration.

That is what the prophet is getting at in the first verses of Isaiah 35 – the desert in bloom is beautiful, colorful, *joyful*. The image of joy that the prophet seizes upon is the image of a place that is usually dull and barren bursting in abundance. What the prophet envisions here though is the “after” (even the “happily-ever-after”). He does not describe the before – the rain that makes the desert blossom. There can be no bloom, no joy, without it. Spending time in the high desert, I have seen how its denizens hoard water, cherish it. The thing that a Pittsburgher may think of as inconvenient or depressing may be, for a desert-dweller, lifegiving. A desert does not bloom without clouds, without moments that I would interpret (*misinterpret*) as gloomy or depressing.

The prophet understands this. Flowers do not pop up out of nowhere. Life, beauty, abundance, all require more than days of unbroken sunshine. If we want to bloom, we need rain as well: the rain of disappointment, the rain of reflection. That is the promise of Advent: at the end of this period of waiting and contemplation, there will be joy.

*God of rain and sun, God of dry land and blossom, help us to recognize the need
for balance. Help us to see Your hand in both light and darkness.*

Wednesday, December 14
Hendricks

offered by Kathleen Davies

*“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him *
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm, *
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, *
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers, *
to Abraham and his children for ever.” (Canticle 15 Page 91, BCP/ Luke 1:46-
55)*

She was young and poor and pregnant out of wedlock. She had been given a gift, yes, but a gift that was about to make her life immensely more complicated than it had been. In the next few months, she would leave the village where she had lived all her life; she would give birth in a strange city, far from the comforting presence of her family. She would be forced to flee her homeland in the middle of the night. All these complications were above and beyond the ordinary anxieties of being a parent; anyone who has raised or loved a child knows the pain of sitting by a sick child's bedside or the anxiety of coping with bullies.

Still, when Mary opened her mouth, praise poured out. But her song is not just praise for the personal blessing that she had received (the blessing of motherhood, the blessing of future honor). She may even suspect that in the short term, all will not be joy. Perhaps she knows that her son will be misunderstood, that he will attract enemies, that his friends will fail him...and that she will feel every bit of his pain. Her full-throated hymn finds joy in a God who does not simply change individual lives but who changes the way the world works. She imagines a world where the structures of power are reversed, where the hungry are sated and the proud are confounded. She sings of a world governed by radical kindness. And she asserts that this is not some shiny future but that this has already happened: God

HAS cast down the mighty from their thrones; God HAS filled the hungry with good things. Her song of praise makes the radical claim that those who love God, “those who fear him in every generation,” already live in a world of justice and mercy.

Perhaps that is because God exists outside of time. The future joys that we anticipate have already come to be in God’s time. Mary’s song makes space for the miracles that God will enact, has enacted; it also makes space for all that her son will do – preaching and healing, changing the way we relate to one another. But I wonder if, in contemplating the blessing of motherhood, Mary recognizes her own responsibility for bringing about the justice and grace she imagines. As a mother, she will need to comfort her child, to guard his growing heart, to teach him the promises that he is meant to fulfill. She will help him to take his place in the community; she will tell him about who he is and what is expected of him. Yes, God will lift up the lowly and feed the hungry...but not without her help.

God who feeds the hungry, God who exalts the lowly, help us to do Your will. Help us to do the work.

Thursday, December 15

offered by Kathleen Davies Hendricks

“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” (James 5:7-10)

“Are we there yet?” a voice calls from the back seat. “How much longer?” “Almost there,” the driver promises, “Here, have a snack, play a game, watch a video. We’re almost there.” Outside, the road rolls away into darkness. There are miles to go, but the children in the back are distracted. They will reach their destination, but for the moment, they need to wait.

Small fingers grasp at the tiny door; pry; pull. Behind that door is an image, or perhaps a small trinket or a piece of candy. That’s how Advent calendars work – they help us to count down the days to Christmas, prodding us onward with little rewards. We while away the days until the biggest day of all.

In this week when we honor the joy of Christ’s birth, the reading from James seems strange, out of place. James offers no distractions. Instead, he speaks of suffering. He advises us to be patient. His letter also compares the coming of the Lord to the

arrival of a harvest. *“The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth,”* James says. But a “crop from the earth” isn’t something that just happens. Rather, the farmer cultivates the crop, planting seeds, watering them, sheltering them from harsh weather. We too are responsible for bringing about the Kingdom of God – we act as Christ’s hands and feet in this world. We study. We spread the gospel.

And we wait.

But if James offers us nothing to distract us from the task at hand, he warns us to be kind to one another, not to complain about the waiting or our companions in this task. He assures us that the Judge is standing at the doors.

See? We’re almost there.

God of peace, God of patience, give us the strength to wait. Give us the strength to look inward without flinching. Help us to live in loving community in anticipation of Your arrival.

Friday, December 16
Hendricks

offered by Kathleen Davies

“Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Luke 2:8-20)

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

Last August, my husband was supposed to fly out to Los Angeles to help our daughter move into her first house. He had a ticket purchased. He had a plan. But then, the day before he was scheduled to fly out, he had to make an unexpected home repair. After a

long day at work, he found himself up to his eyeballs in drywall and plaster. He dropped into bed exhausted and woke up more than ten hours later, having missed his alarm...and his flight. A frantic online search yielded one seat on one carrier heading out of Pittsburgh later that day. When he boarded the plane, he still felt guilty and anxious. Then, the plane started to climb above the clouds. He found himself in a world of light, of towering cloud castles, of heartstopping beauty. He was still tired, still worried; he hadn't expected to find himself transported by what he saw around him. Instead of dropping into an uneasy sleep, he found himself staring out the window, moved and overwhelmed. He was, in the words of C. S. Lewis, surprised by joy.

In the Nativity story, joy comes as a surprise at least once. Unlike Mary who had nine months to anticipate the birth of her child, unlike the magi who had been studying the skies all their lives, the shepherds watching their flocks in the hills above Bethlehem weren't looking forward to anything in particular. Their lives had probably given them very little to look forward to – they were laborers, at the bottom of the social scale, afforded almost no autonomy. If they were scanning the skies that night, they might have been looking for rain, wondering if the weather would affect the health and safety of their flock. They never expected to be dragged into a larger story. They didn't want a face-to-face encounter with supernatural beings or a hands-on experience of messianic prophecies. They didn't ask for light or music; if anything, they probably hoped to escape the notice of the Most High, living productive, predictable daily lives.

No wonder their first reaction to the angels was not happiness or vindication but fear. They didn't even know what they were seeing. They had to wrestle with this vision, trying to comprehend it. And yet...and yet...they dropped everything, heading into Bethlehem to bear witness to the angels' song. Their lives divided at that point. Before crowds and kings, the shepherds became the first witnesses to Christ's birth, the first evangelists of the good news. Unlike everyone else in the story, they weren't anticipating Christ's birth. They didn't even know what they wanted or needed until it appeared.

God of the unexpected, God who knows us better than we know ourselves, give us a capacity to wonder. Give us the capacity to change. Let us follow where You lead.

Saturday, December 17

offered by Kathleen Davies Hendricks

*“For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called
“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

Of the increase of his government and of peace

*there will be no end,
upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom,
to establish it, and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.” (Isaiah 9: 6-7)*

Lights blaze in the sanctuary; voices rise in what the psalmist describes as a “joyful noise.” It is Christmas Eve at last, and we call out in celebration and relief. Every year, we sing the songs, words familiar to us since childhood: “Glory to the newborn king!” “All is calm, all is bright.” Because the words are well-loved, we may have stopped thinking about them. Our lips move automatically through the verses, carried along by the fervor and yes, the joy of the moment. But in between sweet images of a young mother and her infant, in between pictures of silent stars and singing angels, there are some different and perhaps more radical visions of joy. The child whose birth we celebrate is not only a child, after all. The promise that he carries is that he will change *everything* - how we relate to God, how we relate to one another. He will change the very structures of power. Just consider this verse, smack in the middle of “Joy to the World”:

*He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love
And wonders of His love
And wonders, wonders, of His love*

Isaac Watts, one of the great hymn writers of the Church, offers a vision of Christmas that has little to do with hay-filled mangers and lullabies; he is not celebrating the birth of a child but the triumphant arrival of a king. Watts describes a world united under Christ’s benevolent rule. He imagines a world governed by truth and grace, by righteousness and love. Perhaps, in these divided times, we find it hard to imagine what that kind of government would look like. “Joy to the World” depicts not only the reaction of the earth’s citizens but the method and effects of Christ’s reign – he will not simply cause joy, but he will act from a place of joy.

Every year, Christ comes home at Christmas, welcomed not only into our sanctuaries, but into our hearts. He greets us with the relief and anticipation we can expect from a beloved brother after a long journey. He promises joy – not only the joy of presents and food and family, not only the joy of songs and bells and pageantry, but the joy of justice, of peace. He promises the joy of reconciliation not just for the individual soul, but for the whole world.

*God of justice, God of righteousness, help us to be ruled by You. Help us to embody
Your mercy and Your equity. Guide us as we usher in Your kingdom.*

WE LIGHT THE CANDLE OF PEACE: ADVENT 4



Sunday December 18
December 1, 1982

offered by Frank Horrigan

Dear Santa,

My name is Paul Mayfair. I'm nine years old. I live in Pittsburgh with my brother and sister. My brother is seven and he's going to write his letter to you soon. My sister is four. My parents are going to write to you for her. She can't read yet. I like all of the Pittsburgh sports teams. It's football season now, so my favorite player is Terry Bradshaw. He's the quarterback for the Steelers. I know I said the same things to you last year, but you must get a lot of letters.

Anyway, this year I'd like a football and a bicycle for Christmas. And if it's possible, could the bike have ten speeds? It's really hilly here.... Also, can I ask for a toy for our dog Bailey? He's been very good this year.

I hope I made the Nice List this year. My brother says I didn't.

Also, I have a question. I know what Christmas is about. I know we celebrate the birth of Jesus, and that he is the Son of God. And we give each other presents, kind of like it's everyone's birthday at once. That's really cool. But I hear people say, "Peace on Earth, goodwill towards men," and sing, "Let There be Peace on Earth," and call Jesus "The Prince of Peace." But there isn't peace on Earth. Countries and people get in fights all the time.

Santa, can you tell me, what does "peace" even mean? Could we really have peace on Earth? Thanks for listening.

Your friend,

Paul

January 15, 1983

Dear Paul,

I'm sorry it took a little while to answer you, but as you might imagine, this is my busy time of year. After Christmas, I needed a little break.

I must say that your letter was most unusual. I don't often reply to letters. I consider that I answer most letters by the work I do on Christmas Eve. But you didn't ask for much (I hope you like the bike by the way. Ten speeds, just like you asked!), and one of your requests was for your dog. What really made me take notice was your question about peace on Earth. That really got me thinking, and after a while I thought I'd try to answer your question as best I can.

But first, I need to clear something up about the Naughty and Nice List. Yes, there is a Naughty List. But no one's on it. Spread the news!

“Peace on Earth” is a sleighful, as we say up here. But when something seems too heavy to lift, the best thing to do is to unpack the sleigh to make the load a little lighter, and ask for help.

Let’s unpack the sleigh first. In that song, the line after, “Let there be peace on Earth,” continues, “And let it begin with me.” Finding peace within yourself is a great way to build peace on Earth. I bet I can guess your next question: How? Alas, Paul, that has no easy answer. But *wanting* to find peace within yourself is an important first step to actually finding it. The funny thing is that often when you want to find peace, often it’s peace that finds you.

I remember a time when I took that step. It was on a night up here right after a snowstorm. We were gearing up for Christmas, and there was a lot of pressure. I was irritated about something, and I just had to step outside. The new snow muted everything. Not even the wind was blowing. I stood outside in the dark. I was by myself, but I didn’t feel alone. I felt a presence, the goodness of creation, coming from the inside out. I felt like I *belonged* to this goodness. My irritation fell away. To this day, I don’t remember what had been bothering me. It didn’t matter. I went back inside and I was a little gentler to the elves.

I know you like sports. Maybe it will find you as you work together on a team. Do you play an instrument? Maybe it’ll be in learning a challenging piece of music. I was on a whale watch in New England many years ago, and felt it again, in the middle of the ocean. (Yes, I like to go south from time to time...) The point is, you never know when and where those moments might happen, so I hope you will be open to them in unexpected places.

Let me end with the part about asking for help. I like to think about the story in Genesis, where at the end of the sixth day, God creates humankind, evaluates His creation, and pronounces it “very good.” So when finding peace in yourself is hard and finding peace in the world is even harder, please remember your own “very goodness.” Then remember everyone else’s. Don’t be afraid to trust God or to ask God for help in finding the best parts of other people. This is not so easy sometimes. But remember what I told you about the Naughty List? There’s a reason for that.

Your Friend,

Santa

Monday December 19

offered by Frank Horrigan

December 5, 1992

Dear Santa,

It's been a while. When you wrote me back all those years ago, I was so stunned. You see, my friends had been making fun of me, and I told myself that that was going to be my last letter to you. Your reply changed all that. It changed a lot of things. I'm 19 now, and in college. Just getting here was tough. I really started to pay attention in school by junior year of high school. I studied hard for exams and SATs and AP tests, and I'm happy with my college choice and my friends here. But I put aside writing letters to you — things got so crowded.

When I'm not at school, I still live in Pittsburgh. I'm still a sports fan. The Pirates got so close to the World Series this year. It was heartbreaking. There's always next year.

I should tell you that what you wrote to me about peace all those years ago stayed with me. I tried to take it to heart, but I was nine years old, and didn't understand it. I still don't. But bad things happen in the world all the time. So sometimes when things get to be too much, I try to do what you suggested. It doesn't work a lot of the time. Sometimes I do get a sense of the possibility of peace. And I guess that's the best I can do. "A sense of a possibility." Those words sound empty, like I'm trying to grasp the wind. It probably makes no sense to you. Can you help me understand this? You must have it all figured out.

By the way, am I the oldest person ever to write you a letter?

Your friend,

Paul

January 11, 1992

Dear Paul,

How delightful to hear from you! It *has* been a long time, but I remember our correspondence fondly. And Merry Christmas! It's not too late for that good wish.

I will answer your last question first. No, you are not the oldest person ever to write to me. I have friends who write to me all the time. It's my preferred way to keep in touch, much better than a phone call. You are, however, one of the only people who has maintained a conversation with me starting with a Christmas List. You're right, most children fall away from that habit. I'm so glad you didn't.

Despite the difficulty in trying to find peace from the inside out, I encourage you to keep at it. This practice is difficult for everyone, not just you. I can't tell you how it gladdens me that my advice has stayed with you all this time. *You* gave *Santa* a great gift by sharing that.

I can tell from your letter that you have learned an uncomfortable truth. It's an inevitable part of growing up, and it's one of the most challenging parts of my job. It's the certainty that life is hard, and too often unfair. How are we expected to find peace in such a world?

Remember when I told you about that night after a snowfall? That evening, remember, it wasn't that I found peace, it's that *peace found me*. I was just there, looking at the stars, listening to the muted silence. I was in awe of creation, of the starlight that traveled thousands of light-years just so I could see it. In that moment I felt utterly insignificant and unique at the same time.

The gifts of the snow, the quiet, the starlit darkness was here just for me. And, as strange as it sounds, *I was here for it*. It didn't make the world less hard or unfair. But it put the hardness and unfairness in this context: God's creation is good. And we are *very* good.

Then I remembered some verses from Paul's letter to the Ephesians (1:4), where he tells us that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be blameless before him in love." *Chosen before the foundation of the world*. Wow. Hard times come and go, but we are eternal.

All these things I wanted to tell you ten years ago, but Funny, I was going to say that a nine year old couldn't have understood that, but I think that's untrue. Maybe nine year olds understand it best.

So Paul, maybe one clue to the question is this: when you are trying to find peace, you are really searching for something divine, something of God. And

we are taught that God is everywhere, all around us all the time. So maybe don't try so hard to find Peace, or to be at Peace. I don't think you can conjure Peace like a genie from a bottle. I mean, if you could boss God around like that, who would really be in charge?

Instead of trying to find Peace, try "setting the table" for Peace to find you.

Instead of trying harder, try softer.

I am certain you will succeed, even if it feels like you are failing. Peace be with you.

Yours,

Nicholas

Tuesday December 20
December 11, 2001

offered by Frank Horrigan

Dear Santa,

This letter is both a year early and a couple months too late. Even though I write to you with less frequency, it's important for me to make sure I send you a letter at around the ten-year anniversary of That One. I've come to think of the Ten Year Letters as ZuZu's Petals from "It's a Wonderful Life." They are a reality check, a reminder of what is enduring and important.

Three months ago we had a different reality check. Everyone will remember where they were on September 11. I was only a couple weeks in to a new job, still in Pittsburgh. I just graduated from business school in June and took the summer off for a vacation. Anyway.....

Santa, the world changed in a day. People are scared and angry. They want revenge. I want revenge. I suppose that this is how people felt after Pearl Harbor, but Pearl Harbor wasn't broadcast on live TV. I can feel something in me harden. What kind of people would do such a thing? Peace Through Strength is the way to go. I'm pretty much done with Peace on Earth. It's time to put that aside and acknowledge Christmas as a Winter Solstice Holiday crafted and refined by corporate America.

Do you know the TV show "Seinfeld?" Many years ago they had an episode where one of the characters would scream "Serenity now!" in an effort to find peace. That's about where I am.

Paul

December 20, 2001

Dear Paul,

I had to reply as soon as I could. I'm so glad to hear from you, and I'm glad you're safe. It's very busy here, but my message to you couldn't wait. I know the sound of a cry for help. I've made that cry myself.

Paul, in my experience, peace is an outcome. It develops over time, once you've chosen to try to live in accordance with certain qualities. People who live with Hope, Faith, and Love will eventually realize that they are living in Peace.

Make no mistake, this is not easy. How does a normal human being live in Hope after what happened in your country? How do you make an affirmative choice to love your enemy, especially when you see what the enemy will do? But if you choose another path, you fall prey to cynicism. I have observed that the cynic is a person who builds a wall around himself as protection. But the wall is too perfect. The desire to live in Hope and Faith and Love remains, but it can't get out. The conditions for Peace exist outside the wall, but can't get in.

The cynic cries out, "Leave me in peace!" And gets only half the wish.

You are at an inflection point, Paul. One way or another, you are going to have to choose. That choice is itself a gift from God, for God gave you free will. God wants you to live with Hope and Faith and Love, but God wants you to *choose* it.

As we're in the season of Advent, I please consider this thought:

Mary said "Yes" to the angel Gabriel. I have no way to know this, but I believe that Mary had to know how the world was going to treat Jesus, her baby. In the Bible, Mary treasures a lot of things in her heart. Yet, with the certain

knowledge that her heart would be broken, and Hope that it would be repaired in ways she could not imagine, she took a leap of Faith and said, "Yes." She gave birth to the Son of God and Loved him as a baby, an adolescent, and an adult. The real heroism of Mary, though, is that I believe she knew before anyone how this was going to play out. She said yes anyway. But she had to have had the option to say no.

Paul, I believe that God calls to us all the time. It's just up to us to be receptive to those calls. The cynic, with shields up, can't hear them. Look up Psalm 95. My best advice comes from there. "If today you hear His voice, harden not your heart."

Blessings to you, Paul. I'll check in soon.

Yours,

Nicholas

Wednesday December 21

offered by Frank Horrigan

This note, unsigned and undated, in Paul's handwriting, arrived in Santa's mail two weeks later:

"Mary said Yes. That never occurred to me. I never thought it could have been any other way....."

Nicholas sent several letters in the following months and years, to check on Paul's well-being. He did not receive a single reply.

Thursday December 22

offered by Frank Horrigan

December 12, 2012

Dear Santa,

Thank you for checking in over the years. I apologize for not replying, but I had to work through some stuff. I regret to say that for a good long time, the cynic took over. I focused on my career. I'm doing well in that regard. I've been working hard and it's paid off.

Shortly after my last letter to you, I met a wonderful woman and we got married after a couple years. I'm 39 now. Hard to believe. We have a little girl, Nicole. Yes, after you. She's only three, but she will be writing to you before long. How many Mayfairs can write you at once? Because we just learned that there is another on the way.

You were right to point out the dangers of cynicism. After 9/11 it seemed that everyone got a little bit harder, more suspicious of the Other. I certainly did. Once I started "Othering" one group of people, it was alarmingly easy to "Other" many groups. Pretty soon I was only talking to or listening to people who already agreed with me. Almost all of the rest of the world was Other.

Then two things happened. Years ago I read a book that discussed "thin places." Ancient Celtic mystics believed that these are places (or circumstances or moments) where the veil that separates the human and divine becomes thin. It's a gift, a grace. God allows glimpse into the eternal. These places connect us to something beyond ourselves. I thought of you when I read this. I thought of that passage from Ephesians. I finally began to understand what you have been trying to tell me.

The second thing was Nicole. Children do this to you. You can't see the world through only your eyes anymore. The day that she was born was the thinnest of places for me. The protective shell of the cynic started to crack. Something inside said, "I dare you to let it shatter." I took the dare. I had to. Love demanded it. Once I let my love for her pour out, other Love poured in. Faith and Hope followed. Don't get me wrong. I'm no holy man. But I know for certain that I am not as suspicious of the Other as I had been.

Then I read and re-read your thoughts about Mary. She must have lived in a thin place all the time. The night of Jesus' birth must have felt like the thinnest place in the world, ever. When I read it the first time, I understood it in my head. Thanks to Nicole, now I understand it in my bones. Sometimes it is too much to bear, the love I feel for this little girl. And she doesn't even have to do anything except be who she is.

And then another thin place opens up, because we are taught that this is how God loves us. I feel the peace that comes from that.

It's taken a long time to begin to understand what you said about peace being an outcome, the result of Faith and Hope and Love. I still wrestle with it. But thanks to you (or God working through you), I made an affirmative choice to try to live that way, and when I fail, I just start over again. During the "Thin Moments" I sense the vaguest outlines of Peace. That's enough to sustain me. Thank you.

Your Friend,

Paul

January 12, 2013

Dear Paul,

How good it is to hear from you. I had been concerned, but I thought it was important to let you have some space.

Your insights about Thin Places are so interesting. I can't think of anything to add. And Nicole, in addition to being well-named, has clearly brought you closer to God. That is all God has ever wanted.

I am glad that your cynic's shell cracked. Interesting that it took a weak, vulnerable, dependent infant to do that for you. Just sayin'.....

My Christmas wish for you is that you continue to grow in Faith and Hope and Love, and that you pass those divine qualities on to your children.

Blessings,

Nicholas

Friday December 23

December 3, 2022

offered by Frank Horrigan

Dear Santa,

We live in interesting times. A pandemic, civic unrest, climate upheavals — and that's only been the last three or four years. There's been so much discord in the world. Peace, either in the world or in me, seems more elusive than ever. I'll be honest — I've tried many times to get into a routine that might help me find that peace in myself. I'll be diligent for a couple weeks, then stop for a couple months. I seem always to be starting from scratch.

Can I share a story with you? Before the pandemic, I used to go to a particular coffee shop a couple times a week. I liked the ambiance of the place. It had a diverse clientele, and there was an easy familiarity about it. Before long, I got to know the staff and the regulars. It was nice.

Then came Covid. Nobody knew exactly how this virus was transmitted. People were disinfecting their groceries. At a certain point, everything shut down, but before it did I stopped by the coffee shop. The place had been totally reconfigured. To get a coffee you had to stand at the front of the store, wait for the server to put the coffee on a table, then only approach the table after she retreated, all to maintain social distance. We quickly got used to norms like these, but this was the first time for me.

The point of the story isn't in the social distancing. It was in the utter terror in the server's eyes as I approached the table. She knew me by name, for crying out loud! But I could be a disease vector. She was afraid of me. I was the Other to her.

I remembered that the most frequently repeated line in the Bible is, "Fear not!" They were the first words to Mary, and then Joseph, as angels asked them to follow God's will. We venerate Mary and Joseph, but sometimes veneration comes at the expense of acknowledging their humanity. Mary was a *teenager*. In the presence of the greatest mystery of our faith, where every instinct must have been to run away, she said Yes.

Despite these heavenly exhortations not to be afraid, they must have been terrified. So it seems to me that our call from God isn't to be fearless, it's to be faithful. To overcome fear. Not only that, but to transfer faith into action, even if it's a small an action as being receptive to one who might be considered the Other.

I realize that this must seem like baby steps, Santa. But we believe that Jesus' birth brought Hope to the world. It's so important, to my way of thinking, that we acknowledge that before that Hope came Mary's giant Leap of Faith. One that defeated fear and embodied God's Love in the world.

Sounds like a recipe for Peace, wouldn't you say?

Blessings,

Paul

January 20, 2023

Dear Paul,

Baby steps? Nonsense! I've watched you grapple with the same set of questions for forty years. Perhaps you don't appreciate how unusual that is. More than that, your insights have given me new perspectives. The thing I've learned from you is that this road to peace, whether it's in a community or in yourself, can't be walked alone. I'm so privileged that we have been able to walk it together. You see, you wrote me for answers all those years ago, and it turns out that I have the same questions as you do. Is it overreaching to suggest that God brought us into this enduring conversation?

I look forward to many more years of correspondence with you Paul. I enjoy pulling back the veil of the eternal with you. I even enjoy the knowledge that no matter how we tug at it, we will never quite pull it back all the way. That's why we celebrate the Mystery of Faith.

Your presence in my life has been such an unexpected surprise, and I thank God for it.

Blessings,

Nicholas

The correspondence between Paul and Santa continued regularly over the years, and grew in richness.

Saturday December 24

offered by Frank Horrigan

September 2, 2056

Dear Santa,

My father, Paul Mayfair, died early this week. He was a young 83. He passed peacefully in his sleep. He was funny, a little irreverent, and he tried hard to find something good in everyone he met. He was not a social activist by any means, but he was resolute about opening his arms and his home to anyone who needed it. He loved to talk about big, unsolvable questions, and when things got too overwhelming he used to like to say, "Let's unpack the sleigh, shall we?" Then he would smile, as if that was some sort of inside joke.

I was 24 when he told me about you. I didn't believe him at first, but he showed me your letters. He saved them all. And even though you signed them Nicholas, he always called you Santa. I loved that.

I realize that so much of what he taught me about how to live a good life came from his discussions with you. I remember him as being sometimes impatient and edgy when I was a little girl. But he became a joyful man. Every Christmas he used to remind us that there was a Naughty List, but that no one was on it.

Thank you for the influence you had on his life, and by extension, on mine and my family's. We are so grateful.

Yours,

Nicole

(Undated)

Dear Nicole,

I am so sorry to hear about your father. Over the decades Paul and I had some great conversations, and he was a trusted friend. I watched him grow in Hope, Faith, and Love, and he described to me those instances where he felt the Peace of God. He said it wasn't an embrace as much as it was a feeling of being cradled. He only felt that a couple times in his life, he said, but it was enough to sustain his faith in a deeper reality. Those were his exact words. I trust that that is where he abides now.

Nicole, I am going to miss his letters. If you ever feel the urge to well, you know the address.

All blessings to you,

Nicholas

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