

The Sunday Missive -- December 13, 2020



The Third Sunday in Advent

Greetings, one and all, and welcome home to St. Peter's by the Sea. Nancy Castle, Jan Swanson, Mary Sue Gee, Thelma Huchthausen, Diane and Roger Ludin and I bring you this service of prayer, scripture and song with love. We are especially thankful today for the technology that enables us to put this service on the internet for all to see, since our outdoor services have been suspended due to the latest COVID wave. If you go to our facebook page, you can watch and participate from home:

[facebook.com/StPetersMorroBay](https://www.facebook.com/StPetersMorroBay) Scroll down until you see today's Sunday Missive, anytime after 11 A.M. on Sunday, December 13. No facebook account is needed! The links that follow each hymn will take you to youtube videos of a wide range of people around the world singing those hymns – enjoy them! Please direct any questions or comments to your rector, The Rev. Sidney Symington via: (203) 209-2339 or: sssymington@gmail.com.

And so we begin:

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Creator and from the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Gracious God, we praise you for your child Jesus Christ, who is Emmanuel, the hope of the peoples, the wisdom that teaches and guides us, the Savior of every nation. Let your blessing come upon us as we light this wreath. May it be a sign of Christ's promise to bring us salvation. *Amen.*

Hymn 68 -- Rejoice, Rejoice Believers

Rejoice! rejoice, believers, and let your lights appear!
The evening is advancing, and darker night is near.
The Bridegroom is arising, and soon he will draw nigh;
Up, watch with expectation! at the midnight comes the cry.

See that your lamps are burning, replenish them with oil;
Look now for your salvation, the end of sin and toil.
The marriage-feast is waiting, the gates wide open stand;
Rise up, ye heirs of glory, the Bridegroom is at hand!

Our hope and expectation, O Jesus, now appear;
Arise, thou Sun so longed for, above this darkened sphere!
With hearts and hands uplifted, we plead, O Lord, to see
The day of earth's redemption, and ever be with thee!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWIBrTQhdVQ>

A Reading from the Prophecy of Isaiah -- Chapter 61

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, and sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the plantings of the Lord, to display God's glory.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God who has clothed me with the garments of salvation and covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion* Then were we like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter* And our tongue with shouts of joy.

Then it was said among the nations* "The Lord has done great things for them."

The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced* Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

May those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing* Come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Praise to the Creator and to the Child* And to the Holy Spirit.

The God who was and is and is to come* At the end of the ages, hallelujah!

A Reading from St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians -- Chapter 5

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. Beloved, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Hymn 81 -- Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming as seers of old have sung.

It came, a blossom bright, amid the cold of winter,
When half spent was the night.

Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the Rose I have in mind,
With Mary we behold it, the Virgin Mother kind.
To show God's love aright, she bore to us a Savior,
When half spent was the night.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAIro_A1CYw

A Reading from the Gospel According to John -- Chapter 1

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but the true light was coming into the world. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

This is the testimony given by John when the authorities from Jerusalem asked him, "Who are you?" He did not deny it, but declared, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. That one indeed will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire." This all took place in Bethany beside the Jordan where John was baptizing the people. This is the Gospel of the Lord.

***The Magnificat* – Setting by J. S. Bach, Arrangement by Bruce Greer**

Mary Sue Gee, Soloist

I will rejoice in my God. I will rejoice in my Savior.
I will magnify the name of the Lord forever and ever; I will rejoice.

For He has exalted this servant of God,
And all generations will call me blessed.

The Mighty One has done great things for me. and holy is His name.
His mercy is forevermore the same.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

Delving into the cosmology of Advent, it actually came as a surprise to me to realize that Advent is the counterpart to Lent. A time for prayer, penance and preparation for rebirth in Christ. Who knew? What with all the decorations and decorating, buying presents, platters upon platters of Christmas cookies and getting ready for Santa, I missed the memo that this is also time of reflection and atonement, not a month-long party.

We have certainly had time for prayer, inevitable during our isolation and social distancing. What are your prayers? The best time is when prayer just is, what we are, steeped in gratitude and comfort. Penance? I think the world is wearing a giant hair shirt, pandemic-styled. We'll have done a pile of penance during these years, my prayer is that we collectively understand the need for change. Preparation includes seeing all things as sacred, rising above the mundanity of the common, so called cardinal sins, to lose ourselves in gratitude and joy as we await the rebirth of Christ and of ourselves.

Of the four Sundays of Advent, three are supposed to be solemn, represented by the color purple. But then, after two Sundays of gravity, there is today, Gaudete Sunday, a day for festivities, a day of celebration: celebrating the feminine, celebrating pink, celebrating Mary.

When invited to do a homily, I looked at the calendar and picked today because it is pink and celebrates Mary, the mother of Jesus. I thought I might explore some woo woo theories about pink, discuss the benefits of wearing pink clothing, using pink crystals, meditating on the sound of pink (B major) and embracing the idea of pink representing love. Certainly the last is a go-to theme, after all, Bishop Curry always talks about love. I could have gone into the types of love: tough-love, agape, infatuation, limerence, self-love, gratitude, the joy of love....

But then...Mary.

I have been immersed in Mary. If we follow the Gospel of Luke -ish, and adopt December 25 as His date of birth, chronologically, all those many seasons ago, at this time, Mary is heavy with child and probably starting on

the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Some folks could make the trek in four days, 10 was an average, and I'm sure Joseph figured Mary might need a day or two of rest along the way. They would join caravans of others, making their way through the terrain. The roads would have been swarming with fellow travelers, all on the move to meet the mandate of accountability set by Emperor Augustus.

In looking at a map, a crow flying over the mountain roads would fly about 75 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. A slow-moving caravan would travel many more miles, with the inevitable twists and turns over the mountainous rills and valleys. Alternatively, to go down and follow the Jordan River would be a trek of over 100 miles. The advantage to the lower route would be avoiding Samaria, a region that could be problematic. Both routes were hard.

Can you feel her? Can you feel Mary, well into her ninth month of pregnancy? Trudging along, not wanting to hold up the caravan. Reaching the point where she couldn't take another step, and accepting a lift onto a donkey, an uncomfortable ride at the best of times. The route was marked by settlements that had built up around water sources, around which everyone would have rested. Joseph would have found the home of kin, and he and Mary would have been welcomed into the household for the night.

But I'm getting ahead of my story.

The picture on the front of the Missive is The Annunciation by Fra Angelico, a 15th century Italian painter. In the upper left-hand corner of the picture is a sun with a hand extending out, shooting a beam of light directly at Mary. She sits on the right in the larger of two arches, as the Angel Gabriel occupies the center, smaller one. The golden-winged God-infused messenger is in a supplication stance. God is asking this sweet woman, "Will you be my baby-mommy?," evidentially fearing she might say no!

But Mary, Mary is a good Jewish woman who goes to synagogue and 'recites psalms and absorbs their lessons: "Abandon yourself to God." So of course, she says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

"And the angel departed from her." She sits, blissfully stunned from what she has witnessed and what she feels: the light of God piercing her heart. Now, Gabriel had explained to her that the "Holy Spirit will come upon you..." and "therefore the child to be born will be holy."

I wonder if it happened right then, the hand of god piercing her core, or if she was given time to savor being so chosen, time to anticipate the radical change that was to be her lot. Whenever it occurred, I can only imagine the force of the light that impregnated her, and the righteous joy Mary had to feel emanating to her and through her as it sparked a new life within her. And in this case, a very special life, a unique being, to be born both human and God.

Perhaps it was with this secret tucked in her heart and the light emanating from her womb hidden under her cloak that Mary “went out in haste” to be with her cousin Elizabeth. Now, her cousin Elizabeth is believed to have lived in Ein Kerem, which is south of Jerusalem. So Mary, newly pregnant, and presumably under the custody of male kin, walks to Elizabeth’s home, stays for about three months and walks back. Gives us an idea of the strength of this woman, walking over 200 miles while pregnant.

At Elizabeth’s the two women greet each other, and Mary speaks those beautiful words sung by Mary Sue, revealing her two truths:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth during her confinement and the birth of John. If John leapt with joy when Mary arrived at the house, imagine the cartwheels he was doing during those last months of pregnancy! And after the birth, did he, all wild and woolly, demand to be on Mary’s lap, as close as possible to the Christ within Mary’s womb?

It came time for Mary to go back home, and there she would have fallen into the rhythms of village life, with greater responsibilities as a betrothed woman and expectant mother. Then the word came that everyone needed to go to ‘their own towns,’ which in Mary’s case, meant Joseph’s town of Bethlehem. The focus of life would have shifted to preparations for and the embarking on this long journey.

Mary must have felt the babe shifting in her body. We can only surmise that one so blessed to be caring such a blessing would have had what is known as an ‘easy’ pregnancy. However, there is no getting away from impacts of pregnancy on the body, from the flattening of feet and swelling of ankles and hands. The ache in the back from the distended weight of the, oh, so loved parasite hanging off the front of the body. For any of you that haven’t

been pregnant, imagine strapping a watermelon to your lower torso, tight against your bladder, and walking around like that for at least a month, because the ninth month is always the longest.

If they took the mountain roads, they would have skirted most of Jerusalem to the east, meeting travelers who had come from the Jordan Valley at Mt. Zion. From here, Bethlehem would have been a short day's walk away. Certainly balm to Mary's ears, as she may have been experiencing contractions already.

Our image of the sacred birth taking place in crude manger off away from the surrounding buildings is probably incorrect, the product of words being 'alternatively translated', artistic interpretations of the birth, and tradition. It is much more likely that Joseph and Mary knocked on the door of kin, and were informed that while the room in the home commonly reserved for guests was full, they were welcome to join them in the family's room. This room would have had space for animals and a feeding trough, or manger, at the far end. Mary was made comfortable in this corner of the room, with Jesus later placed in the manger after birth out of convenience.

The women would have rallied around Mary, and the men would have taken their leave, for a man to see women's blood was not acceptable. Word would have gone out to the midwives. Two were expected to attend births, the "*shiprah*, the one who trims the child, and *puah* the one who whispers to the woman to facilitate parturition." The women came, as all the laws of proper behavior were waived, as they brought new life into the world.

It was my son, Roscoe, a Quaker married to a Jewish woman, who pointed out that this rendition of the story removes the birth from a male-centric place -- think Joseph, shepherds, wise-men -- and places it right at the core of the home, our home everybody's home. It means from the start, Jesus was surrounded by the feminine, by powerful, caring women who guided him into this world, and met his needs with many hands filled with love. If he was placed for a moment that night in a manger, he didn't stay there long, as different women in attendance would have gloried in the opportunity to hold the new babe.

I don't think the birth would have taken long. Mary was in a safe place with helping hands around her and it was time for God to make an entrance. I'm sure He didn't wait around, sliding down and out of the birth canal and into the world. I don't expect He cried much, maybe a whimper or two to try out

the vocal cords. Certainly a big draft of air, which may have been expelled with a bit of a wail. After all, I assume he knew it all, right then.

And Mary. Surrounded by the comfort of the Jewish sisterhood, reaching for her newborn, bringing him to her heart, to her breast. Her big draft of air would have been expelled on a sigh, a sigh of absolute joy.

Joy. Gaudete means “rejoice” and is the first word of an important early church hymn. Rejoice! Keep the joy at the forefront of your being. Joy is different from happiness. Happiness does come and go, but joy, joy is a constant potential and/or reality, bubbling up from the well of the Spirit within. For after all, we are all born human and God,

Joy is what fuels the work to be done. Remember, Mary was a strong woman, ready to do whatever God asked of her. She had to be! Raising God Himself, even in human form, must have been both daunting and exciting. New babe, new life ahead, surrounded by love, Mary had every reason to be joyful and to learn, deeply, what that state is, so she could tap into it when needed. And we all know, she would need to be able to tap into it, to be able to rejoice through the rest of the story, knowing that this child would bring the Word of God in a way that would transform the world.

I invite you today to celebrate joy. Put on something pink and allow the color to infiltrate your being, radiating joy and love. Open yourself to Mary, thoughts and feelings about this amazing woman who said an unequivocal yes to life. Locate something pink that you tucked away, maybe a gift from a friend or a grand and make a little altar to Mary out of it. Feel joy in your senses. Touch some different textures, different surfaces, with the consciousness Sid puts into the Eucharist. Honor the feminine in yourself and in others close and far. Call someone named Mary that you haven't talked to in a while and have festivities over the phone. And above all, rejoice! We are alive, spirit is within us, and the opportunity for joy is boundless. **Nancy Castle**

Prayers

O Great Love, thank you for living and loving in us and through us. May all that we do flow from our deep connection with you and all beings. Help us become a community that vulnerably shares each other's burdens and the weight of glory. Listen to our hearts' longings for the healing of the ailing, strife-ridden societies of this world and your sorely abused and endangered

planet. Knowing you are hearing us better than we are speaking, we offer all of our prayers in all the holy names of God. *Amen*

We pray for those who are far off and those who are near, especially those we name now – silently or aloud -- I am asking for prayers Katharine Burton, recently diagnosed with aggressive kidney cancer. For Cris and Don Rose and their family, for the home-bound, especially Dorene Hughes, Dee Gatchel, John Severson, are there others? We pray for the beloved of this community who are sick, injured, undergoing medical treatment or in recovery; and for all who are in any need or trouble this day. **Amen**

God of all races, nations, and religions, you know that we cannot change others, nor can we change the past. But we can change ourselves. We can join you in forming our only and common future as you would have it, a future where Love reigns equally over all. Help us not to say, “Lord, Lord” to any nationalist gods, but to hear the one God of all the earth, and to live into God’s good will for this one Creation.

Blessed are you, Lord our God. How sweet are your words to the taste, sweeter than honey to the mouth. How precious are your commands for our life, more than the finest gold in our hands. How marvellous is your will for the world, unending is your love for the nations. Our voices shall sing of your promises and our lips declare your praise forever and ever.

Hymn 397 -- Now Thank We All Our God

Now thank we all our God, with heart, and hands, and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done, in whom his world rejoices;
Who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us!
With ever-joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in his grace, and guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills in this world and the next.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RjAXOcTebi>

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. And thus the blessing of God Almighty: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer be with you and yours this day and remain with you always. **Amen.**