

The Gospel of Luke

Advent Reflections - The Rt. Rev. Duncan Gray III, Chairman, Gathering of Leaders

Friends,

Just a few brief background notes on the Gospel of Luke before we head out on our Advent journey. This book is the first in a two-part series. The book of the Acts of the Apostles is the continuance of this story. Thus, when you finish Luke, if you are so inclined, you can keep reading through Acts to get Luke's complete story.

This gospel was written to a non-Jewish (Gentile) audience which explains why there are so few Old Testament references and why there are so many passages where the despised (by the Jews) Samaritans are commended. The major themes of Luke's gospel are the compassion of Jesus for all (women and the poor are to be particularly noted) and the universality of his mission. The authorship is uncertain, but tradition has it as Luke, the physician, a traveling companion of St. Paul.

Chapter 1

The story of two women—one too old to have a child and one in a compromised status by pregnancy—weaves together a number of important things for me. First, it suggests the ways that God works may be unexpected, even scandalous. Secondly, the great care in which Luke describes the events leading up to the birth of John and Jesus, reminds me of the purposefulness of life. Though it is easy to make jokes about it, our births, were not simply a matter of biology, and the events preceding our births, events that went back generations our therapists would tell us, would shape us in ways that could only be hinted at in our lifetimes. But there is, also, the most radical of all affirmations, that in some way that is as mysterious as it is true, God was involved. If I have the courage to imagine such activity by God, another foundational question is evoked: "For what purpose was my birth?"

The old timers in Canton, Mississippi, remember my mother's ObGyn telling anyone who would listen, that I was the ugliest baby ever born in Madison County. So, surely, he would add, God must have a plan for this little baby boy.

Such become the seeds of a lifetime of exploration.

Chapter 2

Years ago when our church in Oxford was making regular trips to the state penitentiary in Parchman, Mississippi, I got to know a veteran inmate named Simon. He was a large and angry man who had survived in prison by his wits and strength and willingness to do whatever it took to live another day. He had always maintained his innocence, not an uncommon posture of those at Parchman. He readily admitted that he was guilty of a wide assortment of crimes, just not the one that got him into prison.

After one of our services of Advent Lessons and Carols in that dark and dreary place he came up to me and said, "Preacher, the thing that keeps me going in this God-forsaken place is remembering that Jesus was born in in the middle of horse and cow manure (he used another word) that his Mama and Daddy kept stepping in." And then in a brief unguarded and vulnerable moment, he said, "So I'm still hoping that this 'manure' that is my life won't keep him away." (It is an image I continue to use in talking about Christmas.)

A decade or so later on one of my visits as bishop to Parchman we celebrated the impending release of Simon from that prison. A group called The Innocence Project had gotten his conviction overturned and he was going home the next week after almost 30 years in prison.

He asked if he could read a bible passage at our Eucharist. "Sure," I said, "here's the assigned text." "Can I read my own?" he asked. "Sure."

So at the appropriate moment he stood up and began, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word: for my eyes have seen your salvation..." Simon....Simeon. Close enough.

Not long after his release Simon died. I never learned the details of his death because I'm not sure I really wanted to know. But I can never read this second chapter without remembering him.

May we ever remember that it is always into the manure of our lives that Jesus seeks to be born.

Chapter 3

John the Baptist is the quintessential Advent figure. Luke describes him as being an Isaiah-like figure preaching repentance and demanding lives that bore "fruits worthy of repentance". He also took questions from the audience and had very specific answers for very specific questions. Because the longing for the Messiah was intense, John attracted large crowds who

wondered if he might be the one. He answered by saying there would be another, more powerful than he, who would baptize with "water and fire". There was excitement and great anticipation as it became clear that the Messiah was near.

John disrupts my Advent preparation terribly. In my best Advent preparation I work toward a reflective, peaceful time with loving and adoring, of course) children and grandchildren surrounding me on Christmas Day. John wants to disrupt, even change, my life. John wants to prepare me for fire, a terribly unsettling image. The only fire I want at Christmas is safely contained in a stone fireplace. John demands that I see the invisible ones whose lives I have learned to ignore or protect myself from. I want to be left alone to think deep thoughts about God, Jesus, and my family.

I wish John would mind his own business and leave me alone. If I am honest with myself I understand why Herod put John in prison. He is such a nuisance...or maybe, he is exactly what I need.

Chapter 4

Many are uncomfortable with the image of the devil standing with Jesus in the wilderness. The personified tempter with horns and a pitchfork and pointed beard seems to trivialize, even domesticate, the nature of evil. I get that, and I have wrestled with other images that work for me. There is, however, one truth that a personal figure alongside Jesus communicates most powerfully- that evil's temptations are always profoundly personal, custom tailored to my specific and particular vulnerabilities. Generic temptation doesn't move me, but the personalized attack on my unique weaknesses gets great traction. So, I have made peace with the idea of a personal devil, except I prefer the figure far more attractive, and less a caricature, for that is my experience of evil.

I think that the tempter's approach to Jesus was very personal. How was he to live out what was his increasing awareness of his unique vocation? Feeding hungry bodies, utilizing political authority or the power of miracles to usher in the Kingdom- these were very real options, uniquely designed for Jesus. But his "No" to these options opened up the possibility of a "Yes" to bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to the oppressed.

Thus, it seems to me as I fight the unique temptations of my life, seeking God's help to say "No," there remains the transformational question ever before me: To what in God's unique and personal call to me will I say "Yes"? That, too, must be a part of my Advent preparation.

Chapter 5

Over the last several months while I have been at St. Paul's I have become more intentional in my reading, writing, thinking and praying. I suppose it is a sign of my age, semi-retirement status, or maybe God finally getting my attention, that I have been spending a lot of time remembering my life and trying to see God's presence within it. Our faith tradition teaches us that searching the past for God's presence is a helpful discipline for discovering God's holiness in the present moment of our lives. I am discovering this anew.

Thus, it was that two parts of today's reading jumped out at me this morning. Peter, Andrew, James and John, after catching more fish than two boats could hold, left it all to follow Jesus. As I have looked back upon my life, I am increasingly aware that my faith journey began, and deepened through the years, as it became clear to me that following Jesus, in all the imperfect, and sometimes blasphemous, ways that I have, offers meaning and purpose in ways that I have not seen in other alternatives. When things have been difficult for me, or when my soul has become parched and brittle, I have been able to remember other moments when there was more goodness and joy and hope than I had any right to imagine, and that my own boat could barely contain.

Secondly, the story of the paralyzed man being carried by his friends to Jesus touched me, as it always does, by the debt I owe to others whose faith I learned to trust when my own was in shambles. People who were smarter, wiser, braver and more loving than I could ever be, told, and more importantly, showed me that this journey with Jesus was worth all the effort I could give it, even if it led to a cross. I will be eternally grateful for them carrying this too often paralyzed man to places I could not go by myself.

Chapter 6

Being the classic PK (preacher's kid), my childhood was often complicated by assumptions, especially from people who didn't know me very well, that I had a moral compass vastly superior to my friends. This woefully naive view of what it was to be me led a multitude of adults to ask me to do things from which my friends would have run and hid – like being Chaplain in every school organization that I joined. My duties in most cases meant reading a passage of scripture and saying a prayer. The problem was that I knew little scripture and was traumatized by praying out loud. So, to compensate, I would read parts of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain (Matthew 5-7/Luke 6) – the only scripture I knew – and read a prayer from the Book of Common Prayer.

I think the fascination with these passages, and the reason they stuck in my memory, was that they were in direct contradiction to common sense. "Blessed are the poor...Love your enemies...bless those who curse you...do good, and expect nothing in return..." More than once I was asked by my classmates, "Don't you know any other Bible verses?!" But I was fascinated by these. Even as a child I recognized there was something profoundly different from the way I lived my life and the teaching of Jesus. This Jesus person was not the icing on the cake of a well-ordered life, but someone who shattered many of the basic assumptions I made about life.

As I grew up I found ways to explain away the most difficult of these sayings, using the intellectual tools that I accumulated over time. The limits of a fallen world, the cultural context of these sayings, the ethic of the Kingdom of God distinct from the ethics of the world – all were ways that I could minimize the shaking of my foundations that these words would threaten to do. But, despite my best efforts over a lifetime, these words continue to haunt me. No explanation gives me any kind of lasting relief. Some have suggested it's my deep seeded Puritan guilt that haunts me. I'm not so sure.

I'm no closer to being obedient to these words of Jesus today than I was as a child. However, I am learning that, as long as they haunt me, there is hope. God hasn't given up on me yet.

Chapter 7

After all of the stories of Elizabeth and Mary and the babies they were carrying and how the lives of those unborn boys would be so woven together; after John's dramatic preaching of repentance for sin and his promise that the one who was coming would be greater than he and would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire; and, after John's baptism of Jesus despite John's initial reluctance due to his sense of unworthiness (St. John's account), John finds himself in prison wondering if he had made a mistake. He is no longer as certain as he once was.

He sends his disciples to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who is come, or are we to wait for another? (V.30) Doubts and second thoughts – they are part of us all. Once it all seemed so clear and understandable, and I was ready to take on the world. And then it all changed. Maybe not overnight, for it was really a combination of a lot of things, but the certainty that once undergirded so much of our lives receded, and, from time to time, we all ask Jesus, "Are you really the one?" Dare I risk my life, my reputation, my security for you?

To John's disciples, and to you and me, Jesus sends back a simple message: Look and listen to what is going on around you. Look deeper than the newspaper's headlines. Listen for sounds beneath the shouting that has become our public norm. Do you see love being lived out in sacrificial ways? I do. Do you see hope being born out of the deepest hurt and tragedy? I do. Do you hear words of healing being spoken that carry more power than their speaker ever imagined? I do.

If I look close enough; if I listen deep enough I know that he has come among us. Sometimes I can even find the strength and courage to go and tell what I have seen and heard.

Chapter 8

To begin with, it's worth noting the "shout out" Luke gives to the women, including some he lists by name, that provide a support network for Jesus and his disciples as they travel from town to town (vs.1-3). As I mentioned earlier in my introduction to this Gospel, Luke has a particular interest in highlighting the role of women within this "Jesus Movement." It's also worth remembering and giving thanks for those who form the communities of support for us that allow us to do the things we do. Sometimes just getting from day to day requires the care and concern of many. Much as we would often try to convince ourselves otherwise, none of us is "an island, entire to himself" (John Donne).

I also found myself thinking in recent days about the impact of the very limited work I am doing with some in the homeless community through St. Paul's connection to the Lantern Light ministry. Sometimes it feels so overwhelming. The parable of the Sower is a helpful insight into the truth that I cannot control the outcomes of the lives of others (vs.5-15). Some will flourish. Others will not. (Last night at St. Joseph's Catholic Church I preached at a service for the homeless where we lit candles for 48 homeless men and women who have died on our streets so far this year.) However, the success rate of those making it off the streets has nothing to do with my own calling to sow seeds of care, hope, and, yes, even love. I want to see results. God wants to see love.

Beyond the streets and into the worlds we live in, the parable makes the same point. I cannot force outcomes on family, friends or strangers. My call, my role, is to love, and pray God to give the growth. There's an old Jewish proverb that goes something like this: "God gives you the task. He does not ask that you succeed. But he does ask that you not lay the task aside."

In this Advent may we find ways to plant seeds and trust God with the outcomes.

Chapter 9

When I was nine or ten my father took a particular interest in teaching me how to fight. I don't know what precipitated the attention he gave me because I never got into serious fights at school or anywhere else. Nonetheless, one day as he was showing me how to clench my fists so as to keep my thumbs from being hurt as I threw a punch, my mother walked in on his boxing class. She was appalled by it all and said so. To which my father replied, "Ruth, the boy's got to be strong enough so that he can be gentle." Those paradoxical words were filed away as reference points for raising my own sons, but they also became a way to understand some of what Jesus said about losing your life in order to save it and taking up your cross.

Our culture is very clear about being assertive, standing up for yourself and following one's own bliss. In so many ways that we all can list we are, as a society, increasingly self-centered. We have come to recognize the dangers of something we call "co-dependency," and any effort to compromise on any matter is seen as a sign of weakness and a serious character defect. Into this extraordinarily self-centered moment in our common life comes Jesus, offering his own mysterious paradox: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it."

My father's words, if they are true, remind me that it is only to the degree that myself is emotionally healthy that it can be given away. Otherwise, the giving up of self can easily become a manipulative method of getting my own way. Playing the victim (or "martyr") is quite effective sometimes, but I don't think it is what Jesus was talking about. For me this is the intersection of psychological and spiritual health. I must be strong enough to give my life away – to my spouse, to my children, to my Lord. That understanding has been a North Star for me for much of my life, even as I have often found excuses for not following in that direction. And if I am honest, sometimes I wonder if it is really as true as I want to believe.

If my father was wrong, then I've tried to live a very foolish life.

Chapter 10

Jesus sends out seventy -his advance team – two by two – to the towns he intended to visit. He warns them of obstacles they would face and gives them some practical advice. They leave, do what they can, then return. Being sent, doing what we can, then returning. Sounds a lot like church to me.

The feeding and nurturing and training that is the nature of our faith communities was never intended to be an end to itself, but an oasis to return to again and again as we get beat up, discouraged or grow weary of the task given us. "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord" we are told week after week, but it is "sheep among wolves" that Jesus called our work. The last time I checked, wolves ate sheep. To be the Good Samaritan takes a lot out of us, particularly when nobody notices or cares or thinks we are wasting our time with the wrong kind of people. To love is hard work, even if it is Jesus work. Love is not for the faint hearted, for it often ends up being nailed to a cross.

Thus, even as we are being sent out to do the best we can, there is implicit in that dismissal an invitation to return. We will need time to rest and renew. We will need to bandage our wounds, even as we confess our misgivings and shortcomings. We will need to be in the company of others to remind ourselves that there are others who dare to take this craziness seriously. We will need to eat the bread, for we will get so very hungry; and we will need to drink the wine so that we will get crazy enough to go try it all over again.

Chapter 11

Did you notice that the account of the "Lord's Prayer" that Luke reports (vs.2-4) is the Reader's Digest version? Several phrases are left out. Now is not the time to discuss the reason some ancient sources include more words than others, but I did want to note the radical concept that they all have in common. All sources have Jesus inviting his followers to call God "Abba," an intimate form of address that is roughly our English equivalent of "Daddy." That presumption of intimacy with God was as radical a departure from classic Judaism as anything else Jesus did. Recent events in my life have made me appreciate that departure more than ever.

Until I reached adolescence I had always called my father "Daddy." However, the cool aloofness of my teenage years turned that to "Dad." Then for a while, at least in public among professional colleagues, he was "Bishop." Pretty crazy, I'll admit, but it was what it was (our family had a kind of formality that worked in many ways, but came up so short in others.)

Over his last years we made good progress toward a kind of intimacy that I had so longed for, but the best we ever got to was symbolized by what I continued to call him-"Dad." Since his death last summer I've continued that work in some journal writing that has taken the form of letters to him. My preferred form of address in these letters is "Daddy." I've discovered the use of that term has opened emotional doors for me, and taken me to some old and some wonderfully new places in our relationship. When I remember what Jesus was saying about the possibility of that kind of intimacy with God, the one he invites us to call "Abba," something shifts inside of me, and the religion of my head begins to warm my sometimes rather formal heart. At those moments, it really doesn't matter if I'm reading the Reader's Digest version.

Chapter 12

Much of this chapter is about being anxious about the future. At the time of the writing of this Gospel serious persecution of the Christian community had begun. Anxiety about those who would kill the body would have been a real issue. Division in households would have been something those first century Christians knew personally. For those not yet experiencing persecution, the all too human preoccupation with having enough- food, clothing, my share of the inheritance, financial resources, etc.- generated then (and now) considerable anxiety. Notice how many times Jesus says, "Don't worry; Don't fear; Don't be afraid."

Advent is the season of hope. It seems to me that hope is anxiety that got converted (not a totally original thought, I must admit). Anxiety is the product of a worry that there won't be enough of all the things that matter – food and clothing, but also friends, family, security, etc. Hope starts in the same place, but because it is rooted in God's loving care and desire to provide what I need, ("Consider the lilies of the field...") not necessarily what I want, it transforms anxiety into joyful anticipation. " O come, O come. Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel.." sings a people in exile, who dare to believe in a God who invites them into a future they could never have constructed for themselves.

Hope, like anxiety, recognizes that something is missing, but hope makes waiting for the completion of what is missing rich with fertile possibilities (I try to remember that as I stand in a much too long line at an understaffed post office). Anxiety fears what will happen next. Hope awaits a birth that will change everything.

Chapter 13

The references to those killed by Pilate in the temple and those who died when a tower collapsed (v.1-5) allow Jesus to address one of life's most disturbing questions. In his famous little book by the same title Rabbi Harold Kushner posed the question this way: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" The reverse is also equally perplexing: "Why do the evil prosper?" I so want to believe in a world that is undergirded by fairness and justice. When I read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice," I say Amen in my loudest possible voice. Yet, that reality too often seems like nothing more than an illusion. Rather, in the midst of way too much innocent suffering, even as the proud and the arrogant seem to be doing quite well, the questions within me scream out for an answer, "Why?"

I do recall, of course, responding to my sons' lament about what they saw as parental injustice by saying truthfully, though harshly, "Life is not always fair." They were simply asking the same question that has haunted the greatest hearts and minds of humans since the beginning of time, and my response was an acknowledgement that their observation of the world was correct. But I had no easy answers.

As I was wrestling with this question in a very experiential way as a young priest, an older clergyman who became a great mentor of mine, said to me, "There is very little justice in this world, but there is love. It is the reality of love that keeps me from despair." Those simple words didn't answer all my questions, but, like they did for him, they keep me from despair.

Justice looks like a courtroom. Love looks like a cross. I'll rest my case at the foot of the cross.

Chapter 14

Friends, something touched me this morning as I read Jesus's question to the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?" I was reminded, again, of how often I translate God's invitation to a relationship into a set of rules, regulations, even laws, that require obedience if I am to be faithful. Something in my orderly, structured, Victorian personality attaches itself to relationships and focuses, less on their inherent joy, and more on the obligations attendant to them. Jesus was using the language of the Pharisees – "Is it lawful" – to make his point about Sabbath observance. I use a version of those words to define and measure my relationship with everyone-Jesus included.

When I read Jesus's words about inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind to my dinner party, or the servants being compelled to go out into the streets and bring in those same people to a party others have declined to attend, I instinctively think of my obligation to do the same. How I am measuring up is my first response. Discovering how guilty I feel about my neglect is usually a close second.

But, every now and then (like this morning), something else touches me. It becomes abundantly clear that I am the poor, crippled, lame and blind that Jesus wants so much to be at his party. I haven't earned the invitation by obedience or faithfulness- quite the opposite, as a matter of fact. But God's desire for us poor, crippled, lame and blind folks is greater than our capacity to respond.

A now deceased clergy friend would often overwhelm me with praise that was as undeserved as it was uncomfortable to me. When I tried to respond in my great discomfort to his disconcerting effusiveness, he would always interrupt and say, "Just say Thank you."

I am far more comfortable trying, unsuccessfully, to earn God's favor. This Advent I need to learn more about saying "Thank you." I suspect, in the latter, there's a lot more joy.

Chapter 15

First, a commercial message. If you have never read *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen, put it on your reading list. It will nourish your heart and soul and mind in wonderful ways.

Now, back to our regularly scheduled program. My mother died five years ago this morning. That came to me as I read Luke's parable of the father and his two wayward sons. She always talked about how easy I was as a child and how challenging it was to be the parent of some of my siblings. I was elected Most Dependable in my junior high Who's Who. Not many junior high students would take that as a compliment. She did. I did. All the while, my sibs were growing up with a kind of passion and an abuse of freedom that were foreign to me.

You know where this is going. Yes, I got upset at the things that my parents did to accommodate the others, and I made peace with that by developing a kind of moral superiority that would haunt me for the rest of my life. Much, much later as my mother was confined to a bed for the last few months of her life, she blessed me in a way that began to loosen the hard edges of my self-righteous heart. One day as we were singing Amazing Grace – she loved to sing or have me sing to her – she said, from out of the blue, "I would have loved you even if you had been less satisfactory as a child." Less satisfactory? She was repeating her sister's words about her own children, but I knew what she was saying with a gentle smile.

Luke never tells us if the older son made it to the party. I'm working my way there, but Mama helped me begin that long journey home.

Chapter 16

The struggle for some to decide how to be faithful with "dishonest wealth" (v. 11) has become a terribly important spiritual journey for those who have been willing to walk that path. Alfred Nobel worried that his legacy would be as the inventor of dynamite and armament producer, so he bequeathed his fortune to establish the Nobel Peace Prize. Other prizes, of course, grew out of that first gift. I know of a family foundation whose ancestors benefitted greatly from less than honorable activities. They now fund a variety of philanthropic projects. Georgetown University's recent acknowledgement that its now massive endowment had its origins in the sale of slaves led it to undertake some new and significant scholarship initiatives. The deep, pervasive and very lucrative slave-owning history of my father's family is something that could not be minimized in his moral development.

Some, of course, refuse to go there. "That was then; this is now. I had nothing to do with that, and I'm not going to feel guilty about it." It is an understandable response, and it is the way most of us deal with such matters.

And yet, as I celebrate the riches of my heritage – personal and national – and remember those whose lives of sacrifice and honor made this country (and my family) what it is today, something still gnaws at me. How can I give thanks for the good things that have come my way through the decency and devotion of others long before my time, and not acknowledge that I have also benefitted from many less than honorable activities for which I had no direct responsibility? Even if I can accept the fact that I (in my family) and we (in our nation) have benefitted greatly from both the good, the bad and the ugly of our ancestors, then I am still left with the moral question of what to do about it. I can remember and celebrate the good. What am I to do with the bad and ugly?

I don't believe that God has given me a clear answer to all of this. However, I'm pretty certain God has given me the question.

Chapter 17

Those who have listened closely for this past year and a half know how formative the concept of duty has been to me. "Medals are given for actions above and beyond the call of duty," my father used to tell us, "because the performance of duty is assumed." Jesus's story of the hard-working slave (vs.7-10) makes the same point. It was my mother who responded to my adolescent complaint, "I don't feel like going to church," with words that haunt me still: "What do feelings have to do with anything? It is your duty. You made that promise at your confirmation." (In the 1928 BCP duty was a major theme).

It is that sense of duty that has shaped and ordered much of my life, and I am deeply indebted to those who planted those seeds. They have served me well. And yet, the older I get, the more I realize that "actions above and beyond the call of duty" may mean something qualitatively, not quantitatively, different from duty. Jesus's words about forgiving over and over again push me beyond my dutiful capacities. There has got to be more than a teeth-gritting obedience that is at work here. The lepers who were healed were only doing their duty as they responded to Jesus's admonition and headed toward the temple. But something more (joy, gratitude, bewilderment?) moved the Samaritan to turn back.

I think that something more is what Jesus is talking about when he says the "Kingdom of God is among (or, within) you" (v.21). Duty, like the law, points me in the right direction, but something more is needed for me to have the capacity to take that journey with anything resembling grace or joy or love. I think Jesus is talking to me about a transformation of heart, mind, body and spirit – something that I cannot accomplish through sheer will power and good intentions.

Being open to the growth of God's kingdom among and within is frightening. It will change me, of that I am fearfully certain. Yet, it just may be, for me, the fulfillment of a lifetime of very imperfect efforts to be obedient to my duty.

I really would like to feel what that Samaritan leper felt.

Chapter 18

Two things spoke to me in the reading this morning.

The first thing that grabbed my attention was the value of just showing up. The widow kept showing up at the judge's doorstep, and Jesus talks about crying out to God day and night. The tax collector, with considerable guilt and public scorn, continued to show up at the temple. Parents, risking ridicule or worse, kept bringing their children to Jesus. The second thing that I noticed was how many missed the point – the Pharisee, the ruler, and, of course, the disciples, who pushed the children away, told the blind beggar to keep his mouth shut and failed to grasp Jesus's words about suffering.

Maybe it's too early in the morning for my brain to function properly, but there seems to be a connection in those two observations. I'm often tempted to believe that I have to get my spiritual act together before I can present myself for worship. Related to that is the temptation to believe that I have to understand everything before I can dare preach or teach on anything. There is, of course, the equivalent for those who don't have leadership responsibilities on Sunday mornings. We all want to understand things before we get too committed.

What I hear in this chapter is the clear message that I am going to miss the point – over and over again. I will never get it all right. But, I also hear that my lack of sufficient understanding is never an excuse for inaction. I need to keep showing up in the places where Jesus has been known to dwell – in communities of faith, with the poor and forgotten, in the suffering of friends and family – and dare to believe that just showing up may be sufficient. If that is true, then my deepest prayer becomes, "Here I am, Lord. Use me as you will."

Chapter 19

Though it seems a little strange to be reading about Jesus entering Jerusalem in the Palm Sunday texts on this, the Monday before Christmas, there does seem to me to be some connection. Advent is about pregnant waiting. It is waiting and hoping and dreaming with the fullness of anticipation that something more is possible. It is living as though what we dare hope for is more real than the frustration and fatigue and boredom and hurt of much of our lives. Something has been, is now, and will be born that touches the deepest longings of our hearts. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight," we sing in what I think is the greatest of all Christmas lyrics.

The Jewish hope for a messiah, the deep yearning for one to restore Israel to its former glory, the excitement generated by Jesus's entry into Jerusalem – all are both about a specific moment in time and speak to that same yearning for something more that is rooted deep within the human condition, regardless of time or place. Indeed, it is so much a part of us all that if we cannot find the words to say it out loud, "the stones themselves would shout out."

And yet, as we watch and wait, we are increasingly aware of the rest of the story. These stories are not only about the emptiness of the soul that cries out to be fed, but they are also about how we are so blind to our deepest need, and how, in our blindness, we too often travel down terribly destructive paths. The child to be born will be carried by his family into Egypt to escape the wholesale slaughter of innocent babies. Mary had been warned that this was not going to be easy. The hopes and shouts of joy on Palm Sunday lead always to the cross on Good Friday, though we so fervently wish it were not so. Even as he receives the shouts of joy, Jesus weeps over the city, and then speaks of his own deepest longing, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace."

May this Advent be that moment when we discover what our soul truly longs for and recognize the things that make for Shalom – that peace that the world cannot give. It might just help out with the post-Christmas let down.

Chapter 20

This entire chapter describes a portion of what were, apparently, ongoing conflicts between Jesus and the authorities, both religious and secular. Though there were some notable exceptions, the chief priests, the elders, the scribes, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herod, Pilate etc., were resistant to the teaching of Jesus, even to the point of planning his death. At the same time, outcasts of all types – Samaritans, tax collectors, women, the poor, crippled and blind – were far more open to his teaching and made up the vast majority of the crowds that followed him and of whom the authorities continually were afraid (v.19).

This past Sunday I was preaching, celebrating and leading a Sunday School discussion at St. Patrick's in Long Beach, MS. In our discussion on forgiveness a young man said pointedly, "It is beyond my capacity to forgive the really bad stuff. I need God's help just getting me to the point where I even want to forgive." It seems to me that his words, in part, give an insight into the different responses to Jesus in first century Palestine.

The secular and religious authorities were successful in their lives. Through the sheer force of hard work and will they made it to "the top." When Jesus spoke of God's love for them, it was all too easy for them to think, "Why, of course. I deserve to be loved." They (and dare I say, we) were less inclined to understand their need for what Jesus was offering precisely because they had been so successful on their own. On the other hand, there were those who – either through their own self-inflicted wounds or as a result of being broken by life – were acutely aware of their own limitations, and responded to Jesus like a dry sponge to water. They knew they did not deserve to be loved, but when that Love touched them, their lives were changed.

To paraphrase the young man in Long Beach, I have become acutely aware that it is beyond my capacity to do the really GOOD stuff. I know how to be successful. Work habits and the force of will have accomplished many things, but I need a power from beyond myself to be better than I really am. There are finite limits to how much I can will myself to love (or forgive). I need a Savior.

"O come, O come Immanuel" is our Advent prayer. May our preparation in this season open to us our need for something beyond ourselves.

Chapter 21

Kathy and I have been battling the flu for several days. When the doctor told me I wasn't going to die I wasn't sure that was good news. With the aid of Tamiflu, he said, I would just have to ride it out.

Luke was living through the siege of Jerusalem, its ultimate occupation by the Romans and the destruction of the temple that were taking place as he wrote. He, like Matthew, also merged these contemporary events with images from the Old Testament about the seeming catastrophe that preceded the coming of the Son of Man to usher in God's Kingdom. Beneath the description of wars, earthquakes, persecution and family division Luke is presenting a message of hope. You will be given a time to witness to the hope that is within you, says Jesus (vs. 13-15), while the chaos is but a sign that the kingdom of God is near (v. 31). You will just have to ride it out, says Jesus. But you will have the hope that God is taking even of worst of human life – the horrors that too often are the product of human history – and redeeming them for God's purposes. Fear not when you see these things. The kingdom is near.

So, while it has no resemblance to war, earthquakes, and persecution, this flu is no fun. I'm not going to die, the doctor said. I guess that's as good as my Advent hope can get at this moment. I'll just have to ride it out, and trust that God will do things with it that I can neither hope for nor imagine. But like everything else in my life, I want it done yesterday. Maybe, just maybe, I'm being asked to think on my urgency and God's eternity.

Waiting is such a horrible thing to waste.

Chapter 22

The story of Jesus's last hours before his death is a most familiar one. But this morning I noticed something that had not always drawn my attention. Before he warns Peter of his impending denials, Jesus tells him that he has been praying for him; praying that his faith might be strong and that he might be a comfort and support to the others. It is not the only time, of course, that Jesus prays for his disciples. An entire chapter in John's gospel is devoted to his prayer for the disciples. But what I began thinking about is what a difference it makes when I imagine Jesus, less as the Son of Man sitting on his throne separating the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25), and more as an intercessor for the world. Both are proper understandings of Jesus, but in my own spiritual journey Matthew 25 tends to dominate.

All my life I have prayed, "through Jesus Christ our Lord", and I am keenly aware of the role of Jesus as Mediator and Advocate – at least theologically. But this morning I had a simple image of Jesus at that Passover meal praying for Peter AND me, that my faith might be strong and that I might be a support to others. Even as I am delighting in this image I am reminded that this was but a prelude to Peter's darkest hour.

Nonetheless, how wonderful it is to see Jesus, at least for a moment, cheering me on, even as he knows the many times I will fail.

Chapter 23

The juxtaposition of "Silent Night" being sung on the radio and the shouts of "Crucify him. Crucify him!" in today's reading is a rather startling jolt. And yet...

Long ago in a galaxy far away...I was chaplain and assistant head of Trinity Episcopal School in the Garden District. At our "pre-Christmas" Eucharist we would always sing a song called "Mary's Child." One of the verses went something like this: " Born in the night, Mary's child, you tell us God is good: prove it is true, Mary's child. Go to your cross of wood." In the midst of all the Christmas decorations and the children who were dressed in their holiday best; in the midst of the worship that was so beautiful and still and quiet (yes, Virginia, elementary and middle school children can be still and quiet), we sang about the crucifixion. More than once a parent would gently question the appropriateness of that particular song, but it was one we sang each of the five years I was a Trinity. One verse in one hymn among the many that we sung that offered a gentle reality check to the sentimentality of the season did not seem too much for me.

W.H. Auden makes much of that same theme of the cross casting a shadow over the manger in his Christmas Oratorio, "For the Time Being", written in the dark days of World War II (a very lengthy poem but well worth your effort during the Christmas season). I can't find a short enough quote to work here, but trust me, it's there.

I am as sentimental as anyone about Christmas. I watch "It's a Wonderful Life," religiously, and always get a tear or two in my eye. Our Christmas tree is full of ornaments that reflect much of Kathy's and my life together, and I get quite emotional when trimming the tree. Having seven grandchildren and their desire to be with us has increased, exponentially, the sentimentality of my Christmas experience. So don't call me Scrooge...

But, unless the love that we all want to share this season has content that is deeper than sentimentality, then it vanishes rather quickly after December 25. Unless that love is rooted in the hope of the resurrection (tomorrow's reading!) which redeems our failures of love that happen all too often, then the love in the manger has a very fragile foundation. The shadow of the cross in the stable is a reminder of how we human beings too often react to God's love. Herod's massacre of the Innocents is certainly a foreshadowing of what awaits. And I need to be reminded that our reaction is not the final word. The story has only just begun!

"Born in the night, Mary's child, you tell us God is good; prove it is true, Mary's child. Go to your cross of wood."

Chapter 24

I stepped on my punch line for today in yesterday's reflection. But to elaborate, we fail so miserably in being the person that the best of Christmas calls out of us. In the aforementioned "For the Time Being," W.H. Auden puts it this way:

"We have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away
Begging though to remain his disobedient servant,
the promising child who cannot keep His word for long."

We hurt the ones we love; we fail to understand their deepest needs; betrayal and denial are too much a part of our lives, if we dare to go below the surface; and then we run for emotional cover when things get too hard. Sounds a lot like those first disciples.

Then, into the residue of their failures (and ours) comes the one who has taken all of our worst to the grave and buried them there. He now stands before us saying, "Peace be with you". It seems too good to be believed, except that I hear him speak those same words again and again in the breaking of the bread, and my heart burns within me, and I find the courage to get up out of the mess that so often is my life, and try again.

It is because of the cross and the empty tomb that I can sing from the deepest part of my soul, "Joy to the World, the Lord has come!"

May your Christmas be holy and blessed.

