

WHAT DO YOU NEED FOR CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR?

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born this day of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever.

A Collect for Christmas, The Book of Common Prayer, p. 213

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST
Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Titus 3:4-7, Luke 2:1-20
DECEMBER 25, 2017

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY
EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: LUKE 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that 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!" 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. But 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, as it had been told them.

What do you need for
Christmas this year?

I realize the question Santa

normally asks is more along the
lines of "what do you *want* for
Christmas this year?" and that's

fine, too.

What do you *need*, what do you *want* (deeply) for Christmas, this year?

Christmas has a way of focusing our lives, focusing the present, focusing our minds and hearts. Early this December we had a gathering that has become a local tradition called Gingerbread Wonderland. A big part of it, from its inception, has been to provide a context for the community to gather, especially families with children, but really anyone. There's not much to it: a wonderful, fanciful, imaginative collection of gingerbread houses made by children and adults from throughout the Valley, local food and drink to enjoy, some live music from children and adults in our neighborhood, Santa joins us, and, otherwise it is simply this hospitable space.

While it has been a great event that has grown each of the five years or so it has been offered by our Preschool and Arts Outreach, this year it was utterly filled to overflowing, maybe slightly beyond capacity. And there was a quality of people needing to be here with one another for conversation, to shake hands or hug, to look one another in the eye.

It may have been living through a year with many natural disasters, international violence

and saber-rattling, senseless gun violence in Las Vegas and the Texas church... all elements that are part of every year to some extent, but maybe feeling relentless this year... and this, of course, prior to the losses and worry of the recent Thomas fire.

So in conversation that night, it came clear that a big part of what we need for Christmas is not going to come to us from an online retailer, big box, mall, or even one of our local shops or artisans: **we need one another** for Christmas (and year 'round).

Our distractions and diversions, and we're good at them, are not doing the job.

Only coming face to face can we experience that we are not units of consumption, agents, functionaries, cogs on a wheel, means to an end, competitors, vexations, burdens, possessions, ornaments, collections of data, extensions of one another's personalities. We are each fully human and expressions, the living image and presence of very God... Yes, hapless, hopeless, and vulnerable though we are from time to time, maybe too much of the time, but there it is....

I realize saying we need one another borders on the sentimental, but I will also say something has shifted in terms of our current state and the trajectory

of *defacing* humanity through various forms and applications of technology, through terrorism and violence, and the degrading effects of poverty, including human trafficking and immense levels of dislocation and statelessness that undermine human society generally.

And needing one another may be family, friends, well-known associates and acquaintances in our circles – but may also be the surprising encounter, the stranger, the person who somehow crosses our path and, in the process, enlarges our world, enlarges our sense of the nature of the human endeavor....

Also for Christmas, we need God. This is to say union and connection with God, actual experience of God, not so much theories about God, ideas about God, talking about God... all of which may be part of our lives, but all of which don't matter without the reality of shared life with and in the sacred – and this is the essence of Christmas, the reality lived in the form of frail, fragile, earthly flesh (mine, yours, others, any and all, which is the intention and commitment of God in Christ).

Invulnerability and invisibility are in vogue these days, and you can think, I'm sure, of many examples of how these appear in everything from style and

design (think of how regular old pickup trucks now put tanks to shame), to what we want and don't want online (increasingly less), to how we tend to live in silos of both information and relationship. We may become obsessed with power, having it and wielding it – mostly for protection, less likely for aggression.

We forget where we have come from and where we are going – thus the need for actual God and the need for one another. God is where we all come from and where we are all going. The time in between, as Fr. Richard Rohr points out, is for becoming conscious, for awakening – and it may take our whole lives to really enter this transformative endeavor that makes all the difference – not only for ourselves but for others.

So, at Christmas, we need to imagine new ways of awakening to our lives, to life itself, and to live (not just function) as people of God. Another way to say this is: we need heaven. In saying this, I am echoing Fr. Richard speaking of heaven *now*, in this real world. There's really no point in pining after a sweet by-and-by if we are not engaged in union with God now. And union with God, the point of any religion, any religious practice, any spiritual intention or practice, is heaven. That's what heaven is: connection with the sacred, the divine and connection

with one another in this larger life of reality. So heaven *not* distant, *not* in the future, not in a “pure” or “ideal” context, not a passive, but a participatory life. If you are thinking about what comes after this life, think of Fr. Richard’s teaching: as now, so then. But start with heaven now – not just a life with vision, but a life of undying compassion day by day by day, bodily, engaged, immediate, full of hope and faith because God’s decision about humanity, clearly expressed in Christmas, will never dim or change.

So: one another, God, awakening, heaven – that’s all we need for Christmas.

And that is what we have.



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