

December 31

Here we are on the seventh day of Christmas and the last day of the calendar year. After a season of Advent, of waiting and watching and hopefully for at least a few moments when we have gathered here in this space together, resting in the awareness that the coming of Christmas has not so much to do with our plans, preparations or parties.

As Christmas has come, the gifts have been exchanged, our scripture reading from the prophet Isaiah reminds us of the great gift that has come into our world...the gift that keeps coming into our lives again and again...

Isaiah 9: 2, 6-7

*2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.*

*On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.*

*6 A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders.*

*He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.*

*7 There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever.*

*The zeal of the Lord of heavenly forces will do this.*

Ah. In Christ the magical and the mundane are both critical. The magical and mysterious is the realm of God and angels and Light. The mundane is generally-speaking the place where we live with our feet firmly on the ground, walking in the darkness of sinful self-absorption, fear, and frailty.

And in these days after the celebration of the big day, the mundane is once again overtaking the magical in the rhythm of our lives. Though the light of life has certainly dawned in the coming of Jesus, the twinkling lights on houses are slowly being left off at night. The packages are most if not all unwrapped. Maybe you even have the tree put away until next year...after all January isn't the time for glitter and gratitude...it's the time for working off those few extra pounds that shake when we laugh like a bowl full of jelly.

The gentle word of caution for us at the very end of the year...the year that some of us are anxious to seal up and never speak of again...the year of loss, the year of change, the year of anxiety, the year when everybody yelled everything in all caps online...the word of caution is not to pack everything away. It's so easy to pack up the magic and the wonder and the light of Christ right along with ornaments and the garland and the tree.

It's easy to throw out the laughter and the joy and the merriment with the wrapping paper and leftovers from that holiday ham we're sick of eating.

I would simply have us think today about letting Christ abide in us today even as the calendar year takes its last breath and exhales us into this next year in a way that at least hints at actual change having taken place because of his hope, love, joy and peace.

As I thought about letting the light abide in me, I remembered something that I used to keep around in and out of season. For many years I kept one of my childhood ornaments out...a praying angel with my name inscribed on it...it was something that actually hung on a suction cup and it was meant for a window but when I went to college I took it and put it on the mirrors in my rooms through those four years and then on the bathroom mirrors in my apartments and even for years in our bathroom mirror as a married couple, up until the suction cup became so rigid and old it wouldn't hold a few years ago.

That angel with my name on it wasn't a guardian or imbued with any kind of power in particular, but that ornament – a gift from my mom, a reminder of prayer, and marked with my own name (itself something given) – it held place.

We all might benefit from some kind of reminder...some kind of holdover or bridge from this magical time of year when the light shines in the darkness and into the mundane movements of January...generally gray in Illinois.

And as we think of the movement of our lives from the end of one year into the beginning of the next we might want to think of it in terms of how we have been unburdened by the magical arrival of Jesus into the mundane moments of our lives rather than think about just adding more resolutions or regulations or unpleasant tasks to our new year.

A little letter that isn't referenced much might help us along our way...

Titus 2: 11-14

*11 The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. 12 It educates us so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives right now by rejecting ungodly lives and the desires of this world. 13 At the same time we wait for the blessed hope and the glorious appearance of our great God and savior Jesus Christ. 14 He gave himself for us in order to rescue us from every kind of lawless behavior, and cleanse a special people for himself who are eager to do good actions.*

Jesus came to cleanse a special people for himself who are eager to do good actions.

Cleanse. To cleanse something means to remove the dirt, the grime, the mess.

Yet, when it comes to receiving the grace of God in the mundane we tend to behave more like teenage boys after gym class...we just spray on a bunch of stuff that is intended to cover up the funk but, friends, adding one strong smell to try and mask or cover another strong smell just leads to a double strong smell. It doesn't fool anybody.

There is no shortcut to cleansing. Either you wash or you don't. Nothing covers up body odor. And quite frankly, nothing covers up the stench of sin rotting away in our hearts, minds and souls. And everyone around us knows it.

That thing we can't or won't forgive. It stinks. That guilt we carry over that thing we did. It stinks. That shame, that anger, that bitterness. It all stinks to varying degrees. And we can cover it up with a smile, we can divert attention from it by filling our lives with other good things, but it won't work forever.

Or if the stink metaphor doesn't quite resonate, then perhaps we can think of the weight of the sin that we carry. And sometimes we act as if the cross Jesus tells us we must carry is just another weight added to our backs. The weight of the cross is the only thing we are intended to carry and its weight is the weight of constant self-surrender. We carry the cross so that we can crucify our agendas, our ideas of success, our issues that we think God expects us to fix on our own. But the weight of our sin isn't meant for us to carry.

Titus lays it out so well why salvation has come: *12 It educates us so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives right now by rejecting ungodly lives and the desires of this world.*

Have we been educated by grace? Have we been taught by the scriptures and the still, small voice of God? An ungodly life is a life that does not reflect the holy, the divine. An ungodly life is a life that is devoid of love, compassion...and God.

I find it so funny every year how we spend December all up in the magic of the season – lights, glitter, ribbons, songs, food and festivities – we are grateful to God and we talk about grace and we receive Jesus fresh and new, but as soon as the season ends we behave as if it really was all just frivolous and not for real. We attack January with guilty fervor – gotta lose that holiday weight from all that festive food – gotta pay the bills coming due for all the gifts – gotta get back into routine and sleep and back to school

and work and it's all kind of let down because everything is special in December and extra work in January.

And have we learned anything about grace? Have we been refreshed by our encounter with the divine? I hope so, and I think we can. But I also think we have to actively resist the desires of this world. We have to reject ungodly lives that do not appreciate the mundane of the Manger.

Grace educates us in love and forgiveness. Grace tells us to be unburdened and to revel in what has been given. But it can be so easy to miss the miracle in the mundane moments...even the obedient, faithful, going to church even on New Year's Eve day kind of moments.

*There is an ancient tale of three horsemen riding across the desert one evening. As they crossed the dry bed of a river a loud voice called to them out of the darkness, commanding: "HALT." They obeyed. The voice then told them to dismount, pick up a handful of pebbles, put them in their pockets . . . And remount.*

*Again they obeyed.*

*When they remounted, the voice said, "You have done as I have commanded you. Tomorrow at sunrise you will be both glad and sorry."*

*Mystified, the horsemen rode on. When the sun rose, they reached into their pockets and found that a miracle had happened. The pebbles had been transformed into diamonds, rubies, and other precious gems.*

*They then remembered the voice, and they were both glad and sorry. Glad they had taken some pebbles. . . Sorry they had not taken more.*

*Christmas reminds us to receive the gift of life with hands as open as we can stretch them so that one day we will not be both glad and sorry. Glad for the gift of life, and sorry that we had not experienced more of it with relish and gratitude.*

Jesus came in the mundane. Jesus came in the manger. But when the world awakes to see him with the coming of daylight, there is a treasure to behold.

During December I very much hope that everyone heeded God's invitation to wait and watch, to remember the gift of light and life in Jesus in all of its gentleness and faithfulness. But as we filled our pockets with what might have seemed like the same

old songs and the same old stories and the same old decorations hung on the same old tree, I hope that we aren't sorry come January that we didn't grab more of God's grace, didn't share in more of God's goodness.

The good news this morning is that technically we are still in the twelve days of Christmas. We are still in the season of celebrating Christ's birth and all it means. And we have the chance to leave this year cleansed, redeemed, saved as well as having filled our pockets with what seem like mundane moments of love, hope, peace and joy that turn into treasures of infinite worth in the light of a new day.

So, when the light shines tomorrow on a brand new day, a brand new year, and we take a look at what we have gathered and kept in obedience will we be both glad and sorry?

To help us find more glad and less sorry, I want us to end this year cleansed, unburdened, from the stuff that can stink up a life or weigh it down.

As we close in song, if you would like to take a pass by the water in the baptismal fonts to remember your baptism or even just to take a moment to metaphorically leave behind and wash off any junk from this year that you want to leave with the Lord, then please do.

Let us pray...