



Christmas 2020

Dear Members of the Diocese of Central Pennsylvania,

Christmas Greetings to you and yours!

One of our parish priests told me the other day that she is calling this year's celebration, "A Christmas Like None Other." I think that is an apt title to mark this year's holiday in the middle of a pandemic.

I am reminded that the whole Christmas story is predicated on the idea of movement- the 80- mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem for Joseph and Mary, great with child; the swooping descent of the angels from heaven to announce the glad tidings of the Savior's birth to the shepherds; and the shepherds' excited and hurried trip to the manger in the middle of the night to "see this thing which is come to pass which the Lord hath made known unto us. (Luke 2: 15 KJV)." In the beloved hymn, Adeste Fideles we sing "We, too will thither, bend our joyful footsteps..." (Hymn 83 v. 4) as we join in the throng to see for ourselves, the miracle of the baby's birth. Following that beautiful night, the motion continues: the exotic Magi from afar pay homage to Jesus and signal an epiphany of Christ's salvation for all people, and the Holy Family's flight to Egypt protects their son from a jealous Herod. To celebrate the birth of Jesus is to be in motion. And Christmas, itself, is the mark of the greatest move of all- God come to earth in the flesh of humankind.

And yet. This year, we are not in motion at all. Many of us have been homebound for months. Separated from children and grandchildren, unable to visit our loved ones in nursing homes, unable to perform critical ministry in hospitals, care centers and prisons. We have not been on the move. We have been staying home. Until we have a widespread vaccine and until the rate of incidence of the virus subsides, that is the best place to be. But staying home does not signal a spiritual bereft-ness. There is another motion, another journey, another gesture that can join us to Christ and bring the depth of Christmas joy to us this year. In another hymn- St Louis, or Forest Green, or, more commonly known as "O Little Town of Bethlehem," we sing of the spiritual movement of Christ in our hearts: "O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O Come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel." (Hymn 79 v. 4)

We can- and do- receive the gift of Christ and the gift of our salvation in our hearts. It is there for the asking and, by the gracious hand of God, we can know God's mercy and righteousness and peace. The "Prayer for Spiritual Communion" that many of us have been praying in this time prepares the place for that transformation. It says, in part:

"...since I cannot at this time receive communion, I pray you to come into my heart. I unite myself with you and embrace you with all my heart, my soul, and my mind. Let nothing separate me from you; let me serve you in this life until, by your grace, I come to your glorious kingdom and unending peace. Amen."

<https://news.forwardmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Spiritual-Communion.pdf>

My friends, my prayer this year is that you will know the depth of God's love and the joy of our salvation in the Christmas story. That while we may be apart, we are joined with Christ and each other in a spiritual bond that no pandemic can destroy. I long for the day when we are together, again, in shared space and know, until then, that the love of God will keep us strong.

May you be blessed this Christmas, abide in hope, and rejoice in the birth of Jesus.

Merry Christmas.

*Audrey C. Scanlan*

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