

## Christmas Eve 2023

I hope you're feeling what you came here to feel. In this old meetinghouse, its classic simplicity, to sing carols you've known for as long as you've known anything, hardly able to remember the first time you ever sang, "O Come, All Ye Faithful," to hear a story you never didn't know, to recover the magic of childhood when you believed something would arrive on Christmas morning that would make all the longing you've felt all month long—maybe all life long!—come fulfilled: I hope you're feeling what you came here to feel right now. I mean, I guess I hope that. I guess I wish we could together recover that naïve yearning, that sense of enchantment—if indeed that's what brought you here this evening. To recover something magical, to recapture something of childhood, whether yours or your children's when you were, or perhaps still are, the maker of magic: that's what inspires a lot of our Christmas traditions. Nostalgia. As I said earlier this Advent season, Christmas is a season swathed in nostalgia.

It's been my habit of thought all month long, to take note of everywhere Christmas shows as nostalgia. I've taken note: Stockbridge reenacting Normal Rockwell's snowy vision of its Main Street at Christmas, the Berkshire Museum offering its Festival of Trees with the stated theme this year, "Nostalgia," churches playing out pageants, with members dressed as shepherds or angels, a harking back to that storied first Christmas, whose story we just heard again. There's something about this holiday that moves our minds to nostalgia, that way of remembering things that never quite were—moves our minds to nostalgia even more than to hope.

I'm wary of nostalgia. Sweet as it is, I don't fully trust it. It demands too much of the truth be let go, and it makes so honeyed our each sense of loss that we're lulled by it, made a bit drunk on the mead of it, lulled—when wakefulness has been the Advent refrain.

"Wake up! Wake up!" So goes Advent, these four weeks that come in church prior to Christmas, this season of preparation for what's to come that though we're so easily lulled to what has been, or what we seem to remember as having been.

Christmas, no, Christmas at its best is a moment suspended between what we seem to remember as having been and what we might hope for as yet to be, what we might *work* for as yet to be.

Have you ever had a new baby in your life? All the preparations to make your grubby world worthy of this one who is yet unsullied. Softening hard edges, making cushy sharp corners, creating a world for this coming one that is as soft and forgiving as this coming one. Christmas

would have us create of our world something kind and caring and gentle so to receive the coming one who might be any of us—for who among us doesn't need kindness and care?

Nostalgia might have us believe that once so was the world, yet it is no longer. Christmas would have us hope that if ever it was so, it might be ever more so tomorrow, and tomorrow's tomorrow. Christmas would have us likewise commit to making it so, as best we can, holding one another in mind and heart as if each of us needs the tender care we once needed in our infancy.

We were all once infants in need of tender care.

What a thought! And not a nostalgic one, but one of shocking truth. We were each someone in such a state of dependance, born into a frightening need for others' kindness.

The coming of God in Christ as a baby is an assertion not only to have played out in the past but also to call us into a pressing present. Prepare. Make room, soft, safe room. Make this world a worthy cradle of heaven. Was it ever such? I doubt it. But if so, we're not to but mourn that sweet passing of a more perfect world. No, we're to prepare for the Infant God's coming again.

The year ahead is shaping up to be a tough one. The world roils in renewed ancient war. Our politics at home teeter on something grave, grim. The economy is unforgiving. Our raising up of young ones is a bizarre tacking between extremes, coddling while also expecting them to take care of problems generations in the making and the denying. People are lonely. People are so lonely.

We are the solution. This is an unspoken assertion of Christmas—that we are the solution. God comes to *us*, is born to us. It is endowed to *us* to take such care, to prepare such room. We are the cradle, our arms its bracing frame, our hearts its warm swaddling clothes, our minds the incubator of what's possible and what needs to be. God is coming. Tomorrow is an arrival. Remember and prepare.

Let us pray: *Gracious God, you who've come to be amidst creation and who thus calls to our consciousness what we are as well, mere people, wondrous people: help us to love.*

*There is so much in this world that seems not of love. We continue in our warring madness, our wonton wastefulness, our consuming of your creation with little care and still less caution. We wither amidst our machines and suffer loneliness for what connectivity they promise and even thinly provide. Our bodies bear the brunt of this withering, this loneliness.*

*This Christmas eve, renew in us hope; rejuvenate among us good will and a pouring forth of grace. Restore us to your justice and help us to pursue it in life, and with our lives, as it*

*abides in everlasting to everlasting. Help us to see the promise and power of your presence in the sweetness of a baby, the vulnerability shown forth and the care evoked.*

*On this holiday that so often stirs in us nostalgia, a hazy remembering of what never quite was, stir also within us and among us resilience in our receiving and pursuing what is yet to come, a way of abundance and ebullient joy which is for all the world—this world, in all its parts and particles and wondrous, dynamic entirety, this world which you so love.*

*Truly, on this holiday that lends itself to looking back, help us also to look forward, in fortitude, in faithful good will and stout good purpose. Empowered by the Holy Spirit within us and among us and ever going before us, help us to enact your reign, manifest your kingdom, that the whole world might echo back your glorious strain, “Peace on earth. Good will toward all people, all creatures of your making! Alleluia; alleluia!” Amen.*