

Highlights of diocesan news in printable format — December 16, 2020

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From Our Bishop

Would you be willing to be a witness to God's love this Christmas?

This is a transcript of a video message.

This is Bishop Hughes in the Diocese of Newark, and I want to talk with you about preparing for Christmas, preparing for Christmas this year in a way in which we've not ever prepared for Christmas before. Ironically though, it is a way that we have learned to prepare for celebration this year: Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, graduations, the return of a regular schedule as school began in September, Thanksgiving. We have learned how to live with health precautions this year in pandemic and as infection rates and hospitalization rates and death rates have risen all around our state, it is clear that we have to continue being careful right through Christmas and into the new year. And we know how to do this.

I certainly understand any sense of loss or disappointment that we might feel at Christmas, but I keep thinking about John the Baptist. In part, it's because we've just heard his story in Advent 2 and 3, and it's not just that we've heard his story, we've heard what he said about himself: "I came to baptize with water, but there is one greater than me who is coming, and he will baptize with fire." His story, his words about himself, his actions were

all a witness, a witness to Jesus. To Jesus who John did not even know at that point.

And so, I want to ask you to consider trying this as you prepare for Christmas. As a matter of fact, it might be the biggest and best way you can prepare for Christmas this year, this very different Christmas. That as you go about getting yourselves ready for Christmas, as you think about Christmas, ask yourself how you can be a witness. How can your words, how can your actions, how can your preparations all be a testimony to Jesus' incarnation. That God so loved God's creation that God sent a part of God's self to be with us. How can your actions be a testimony to that?

It strikes me that it's not just being careful that is so challenging to the times we live in. Three hundred thousand people have died in the United States. People are dying – between 2000 and 3000 are dying every single day. Think of the amount of grief that people are going to experience this Christmas. How can you be a witness of God's love to people who are grieving? We have seen the records of unprecedented hunger happening. We see it every weekend in New Jersey as people move from food pantry to food pantry trying to get enough food together to feed their families. How can you be a witness to those who are hungry?

We know that mental health needs have only increased during this time. What can you do in your words, in your actions, in your prayers that will be a testimony to Jesus' love?

I know it's going to be an unusual Christmas, but I have a feeling that it could be a Christmas that is so filled with love because it is focused on the most important thing: that God sent God's own son to come and be with God's people so they would always know they are loved by God.

Would you be willing to be a witness to that this Christmas?

From Our Canons

We are the wild baptizers, the expectant mothers, the ones who hope against hope

By the Rev. Canon Dr. Andrew R. Wright

I was watching the presentation of Lessons and Carols from Sewanee earlier this month – which is usually a very large public event for them, the final hurrah of the semester for the talented University Choir members. They had reframed it as a recorded, distanced, masked online event, which worked pretty well. As the choir processed in, the university chaplain gave a spoken introduction that recalled that King's College Cambridge first presented its Lessons and Carols service (the most influential version of the service) in 1918. On the heels of World War I and in the midst of a global pandemic, King's College gathered to sing, read, and pray about hope. It seemed very fitting to hear about that in the midst of this particular Advent. Our struggles this past year, with our own global pandemic, with deep concerns for racial justice, with political division, with economic distress, all make me yearn for a reminder of hope.

Advent does that for us; it's a season rooted in hope. It's the hope of Israel for God's restorative last Day, when all would be made right, a hope that we share and still long for. It's the hope of a wild baptizer presuming to call people to account for their sins and offenses in the heart of desolation, trusting that God would forgive. It's the hope of a

mother expecting her first child, a child of wonder, a child of hope, for all nations and people. Advent makes us more and more into a people of hope – even when the brokenness of our world is more visible than ever.

And our witness is needed. This isn't about just making us feel good when times are tough. It's a mission, a calling, to be a reminder for all people of the story we know so well, heralded by angels, attended by shepherds and, later on, magi alike. We can turn that hope into the work of God.

In our Book of Occasional Services, we find the Bidding Prayer (invitation to prayer) for Lessons and Carols. It calls us to pray, as we so often do, for the needs of the whole world, for peace and goodwill among nations, for the mission and unity of the Church, and for our country and our cities. It goes on to say, "And because this of all things would rejoice his [Jesus'] heart, let us at this time remember in his name the poor and the helpless; the hungry and the oppressed; the sick and those who mourn; the lonely and the unloved; the aged and the little children; and all those who know not the Lord Jesus, or who love him not, or who by sin have grieved his heart of love." It concludes, invoking Mary "his pure and lowly Mother" and those who have died, "all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light..." and ultimately leads into the Lord's Prayer.

I love that line, "because it would rejoice his heart." There is something delightful in being called to pray for those in need not only because, well, they need it and we need to be mindful of them, but also because it brings Jesus great joy. Isn't that remarkable, to think about how we could bring joy to Jesus? When we act in hope, praying for those who are poor or helpless or unloved, we are bringing joy to the heart of Jesus and joy into the whole world anew.

God's promise in scripture to renew and restore all creation is not an idle promise. It is happening all around us, even in 2020, even in pandemic. While

it is not yet accomplished, it is already underway. When we look to God in hope, our eyes are opened to that work. When we put our hope into action, whether it's praying for those in need, organizing for justice for those who are oppressed, or simply speaking a word of kindness into a sometimes unspeakably cruel world, we are bringing God's world a little closer to our own. We are the wild baptizers, the expectant mothers, the ones who hope against hope – the ones who sing carols even in pandemic. Rejoice, for Jesus has found his delight in you this day!

Pax,
Canon Wright

From Our Presiding Bishop

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's 2020 Christmas message

Joy to the world! The Lord is come: let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing.

Perhaps like me, you've sung this hymn for years – in church, at home with your family, gathered with friends and neighbors. Perhaps you've sung it to yourself – in your car, on a walk, or quietly in the dark of night.

Joy to the world!

While we may not feel joyful this year – as the pandemic of disease continues to bring sickness and death, when fear and mistrust – a darkness – threatens to overcome the light – we, as followers of Jesus Christ must bear joy to this aching world. We must shine light into the darkness. *Joy to the world!*

Like much in our lives, proclaiming joy is difficult work – also good and essential work – especially now. Though we mourn that which is lost in our

lives, our families, and our communities – *Joy to the world!*

While we strive to pull up the twisted and thorny vines of hatred and bigotry and anger – *Joy to the world!*

Through streaming tears and gritted teeth – *Joy to the world!* – because God is breaking into our lives and into this world anew.

While this is a strange year, the ministry He gives us remains the same. We will prepare him room in our hearts by taking on the ministry Jesus demands of us: feed those who are hungry; welcome the stranger; clothe those who are naked; heal those who are sick; visit the prisoner. Love God. Love your neighbor. Sing joy into this old world. Prepare him room.

St. Luke writes of the first Christmas, “[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” There, in the simplest bed, in the cool of the night, in a trough, in bands of cloth, lies the One for whom no room was made. And yet strangely, there lies the One whom not even the universe can contain.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come. In your hearts, in your homes, in your lives, prepare him room.

God love you; God bless you; and may God hold us all in those almighty hands of love.

*The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry
Presiding Bishop and Primate
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