

# Advent & Lenten Meditations 1999 – 2002

These reflections on the Episcopal Church’s lectionary for Advent & Lent were originally written for a distribution list related to a worldwide Anglican Communion website, AnglicansOnline.org.

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*December 7, 1999 – Ambrose of Milan*

In memoriam Arthur Pedersen+

*Psalm 33:1-5,20-21*

*Ecclesiasticus 2:7-11,16-18*

*Luke 12:35-37, 42-44*

Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright.  
Praise the Lord with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.  
Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings with loud shouts.  
For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.  
He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.  
Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield.  
Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. (Psalm 33:1-5, 20-21)

St. Ambrose of Milan, a 4th century Christian, is regarded as one of the Eight Great Doctors of the Undivided Church. Along with his pupil Augustine, Gregory, (the Pope who codified the plainchant that Ambrose developed), and St. Jerome, Ambrose represents the Latin Doctors. This psalm seems especially fitting for Ambrose's feast day because it includes music, scholarship, justice and faith. Ambrose is the patron of scholars, the writer of hymns and chant tunes still in use today, the upholder of the faith in the heresy wars between the Arians and the Athanasians, and a bishop who gave up all of his riches and lived with the poor. His view of the Church was amazingly inclusive for his times: he opened its doors to all people of faith, of all social classes, whether married or single, educated or simple.

Ambrose cleverly used music to confound his enemies, writing sacred songs to be sung by the congregations during the night watches as they waited out the Empress's siege of their basilica. He's credited with a number of hymns and canticles and with the development of metrical chant. His innovations of rhyme and of iambic dimeter are popular in hymnody even today. Ambrose is also considered to be the first to arrange his music to be sung antiphonally. The Ambrosian Rite is still regularly celebrated in Milan and occasionally celebrated at the University of Dayton, in Ohio. Its main differences include the order of the ordinary, a shortened Lenten season and an extended Advent, full immersion baptism, and the use of red (instead of white) as the sacramental color.

Ambrose most likely wrote the Athanasian Creed, and was primarily responsible for the assimilation of the Arians in Northern Italy. Yet he was a secular bishop, baptized just a week before his consecration, and simultaneously ordained priest and consecrated bishop. To make up for his lack of formal theology, he threw himself into his studies and ended by teaching the likes of St. Augustine. His method of Scriptural interpretation was allegorical, following the traditions of Philo and Origen.

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What would life have been like for Ambrose, I wonder? At that time, it was far from clear whether the Arians or the Athanasians would survive. The civil power structure favored the Arians and their mercenary militia, recruited primarily from the Goths, were Arians. Ambrose was an Athanasian, a believer that the Word or the *logos* (the interpretation of John 1:1) was God, as opposed to a creature of its own, having been the first creation of God. Ambrose was elected bishop precisely because of his success in convincing both sides of the dispute to work together in good faith and in an orderly fashion. A *via media* kind of guy. Yet, by the time of his death, the Arians had all but disappeared.

It seems to me that Ambrose must have done a lot of waiting, and the type of waiting that St. Luke describes in today's Gospel reading: "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks." - Luke 12:35-36

Ambrose was always ready. Ready to study Scripture and theology so that he could become a true and holy bishop. Ready to defend the Church against the State, and as a result to diminish the hold of the Arians in his land. Ready to put his beliefs into action, to speak out against social injustices and to give all to the poor. Even ready to rouse his congregation with song. So it doesn't surprise me that, in the Ambrosian Rite, Advent is six weeks long instead of four. It takes time to get ready for the Coming of Christ.

In our secular world we see signs of this, too. The Christmas tree stands go up by December 1st. The day after Thanksgiving is the biggest Christmas shopping day of the year. In some stores Thanksgiving even takes a back seat. As soon as the Halloween costumes and candy are put away, the Christmas candy and novelties appear. This year, while school shopping for my daughter late in September (new dress code, girls must wear polo shirts, do you know how hard it is to find girls' polo shirts in size XS?) we saw a display of those mechanical Santas with wiggling butts. Dancing Santas, I think they're called, or Rock-and-Roll Santas, or somesuch. In September. My daughter wondered if their energizer batteries would last until Christmas.

We didn't buy. In fact, we have yet to do any Christmas shopping, although I admit to making rumballs (they're better if they age) this past weekend. And sometime this week I'll buy clothing (size 4T, shoes size 9) in pink and red, and toys and games for two little girls in a homeless shelter. The Adopt-A-Family deadline is a fortnight before Christmas.

I'll hate the busy-ness of the stores. Our unprecedentedly fine economy coupled with a new low unemployment rate have guaranteed that more money will be spent this holiday than ever before. However, the stores are having difficulty finding enough seasonal workers to staff their stockrooms and sales desks. And I'll hate the tinny musak sound of bad carols, badly sung. Give me the King's College Cambridge Choir any day.

But I'll love the thought of the joy on those 3-year-old faces when they open their packages on Christmas Day.

There's even a busy-ness in our sacred lives during Advent. The obligatory services of Lessons & Carols, rehearsals for the Nativity Pageant, extra choir rehearsals for Midnight Mass, the Christmas Concerts of the choirs that our children and our parishioner's children sing in, the special family celebrations complete with traditional food and drink. It's difficult to cram all of that into four short weeks and still find the time to reflect, prepare and wait in readiness for the Coming of Christ.

How do we wait for the Lord? The psalmist tells us to wait with trust, because the Lord is our help and our shield. But first, he tells us to sing praises to God. A very Hebrew formula. First we bless the Lord, then we thank the Lord and only then do we raise our petitions. And how do we sing those praises? Well, it sounds kind of rowdy, actually: "Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings with loud shouts." Ambrose certainly sang a new song, and clearly a skillful one, since after more than a millennium, we're still singing his words and his chant tunes. And I imagine that those hymns he wrote to frighten away his captors during the night watches were sung with loud shouts.

So perhaps we are meant to pray aloud throughout the long nights of Advent, to sing our songs of praise and thanksgiving, to whistle in the dark. Because how else will the Lord, who is our help and our shield, know that we're waiting for His Coming? How else will He see that we're ready to receive the Saviour that He promised us? How else will He hear the voices of His people crying in the wilderness: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord?" And how else will we keep ourselves awake through the long, cold and dark night watch of Advent?

Last Sunday we sang, for our Communion Anthem, an adaptation of an Advent text by St. Ambrose. A thousand years after Ambrose's death, Martin Luther loved these words well enough to make them his own. And the tune, *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* attracted Johann Sebastian Bach a century later. He wrote a rather unusual trio for organ, with two bass lines and a soprano, based on it. Our prelude, of course. In honor of St. Ambrose's penchant for antiphons, the women sang verses one and three, the men sang verse two, and we all sang the final verse together. And we sang that last verse kind of rowdy.

Savior of the nations, come! Virgin's Son, make here your home.  
Marvel now, both heaven and earth, that the Lord chose such a birth.

Wondrous birth! O wondrous child of the Virgin undefiled!  
Mighty God and Mary's son, eager now his race to run.

Thus on earth the Word appears, gracing his created spheres;  
hence to death and hell descends, then the heavenly throne ascends.

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Come, O Father's saving Son, who o'er sin the victory won.  
Boundless shall your kingdom be; grant that we its glories see. (#54, Hymnal  
1982)

*Friday, March 24, 2000*

*Psalms 88, 91, 92 and 95*

*Genesis 47:1-26*

*1 Corinthians 9:16-27*

*Mark 6:47-56*

There were so many Psalms appointed for today, so many to choose from, between the Morning and Evening Prayer lectionaries. But something about Psalm 88 struck a chord with me. It reminded me of the lesson from the First Book of Kings, about the prophet Elijah, that we heard on the Eighth Sunday of Epiphany (Year B). The one in which Elijah is inside the cave and has his back against the wall while storms and fires and earthquakes prevail outside. And so he has trouble hearing the still, small voice of God.

Elijah is full of the self-righteousness of a man who's been so loved by God that he was entrusted to be a prophet to Israel. All of those years of righteousness have made Elijah proud, though, instead of humble, judgemental instead of merciful, cruel instead of just. His love for Israel, that great love that overflowed and still overflows God's heart for His people, has turned inward in Elijah's heart. And he has come to believe that he's the only righteous man left on earth. And that the burden of carrying out God's will, of meting out God's justice and proclaiming God's truth falls on his shoulders alone. That he is the sole defender of Israel's faith tradition. And that, as such, the rest of the world is out to get him. Is coming for him with intent to slay him. And that is how he came to be inside the cave, with his back to the wall, fearful for his life, while the world crashes to pieces, or so he thinks, outside.

A cave. It might seem like a safe haven, but it's actually the worst place to be when you're anxious or afraid. Because it's dark. And there are terrors hiding in that dark: bats and lizards and insects. And what you hear is the echoes of that terror. And the beating of your heart and the breathing of your lungs is amplified surreally. And you slip in standing water, dripping down off stalactites. And your footfalls seem to follow you. It's a recipe for paranoia. And Elijah was certainly paranoid.

The worst part is that with all of your fears and anxieties mingling with the natural echo of the sounds of life in a cave, you just can't hear the still, small voice of God. And so you creep further into the darkness and you raise your cry louder and it echoes back to you at a higher pitch, in a whine: "O LORD, why dost thou cast me off? Why dost thou hide thy face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer thy terrors; I am helpless. Thy wrath has swept over me; thy dread assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in upon me together. Thou hast caused lover and friend to shun me; my companions are in darkness."

Elijah's story has some interesting parallels for Lent, too. The forty days journey, the cave, the temptations, the natural disasters and the still, small voice of God. But not

long after Psalm 88 comes Psalm 91, also in the lectionary for today. And, just as Psalm 88 seems to describe Elijah's predicament in the cave, Psalm 91 seems to contain God's answer to Elijah, the words of that still, small voice: "he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. No evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone."

How to avoid the risks of self-righteousness this Lent? How to counteract the convictions that our way is the only way, that we alone are in the right, that we alone know the mind of God? St. Paul has a few words to say in the New Testament reading for today, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 9: "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting...What then is my reward? Just this: that in my preaching I may make the gospel free of charge...For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all...To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law...To those outside the law I became as one outside the law...To the weak I became weak...I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."

That in my preaching I may make the Gospel free of charge.

Just as, at the end of these forty days, we'll celebrate the memorial of Jesus' death and resurrection. His sacrifice, freely given to us for our eternal salvation. And St. Paul calls us to preach the Gospel just as Jesus did: out there with the poor, the meek, the lowly, the sick, the sorrowful, the children, the women--even those widowed and divorced and unmarried and prostitutes--the lepers, the outcasts, the foreigners. St. Paul calls us to be one with those others whose hearts and minds and souls we would win for God. Not to demand that they be one with us, that they change to become like us, but that we become one with them. For the greater glory of God.

We are not so good at doing that, I think. We just don't get what it's all about. And, it seems, neither did the disciples. In fact, the common folk, the ones to whom Jesus went, got it better than the disciples ever did. They acted faster and with more faith than the disciples. And St. Mark, whose Gospel reading is appointed for today, tells us that story, too.

From chapter 6: "And he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret, and moored to the shore. And when they got out of the boat, immediately the people recognized him, and ran about the whole neighborhood and began to bring sick people on their pallets to any place where they heard he was.

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And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or country, they laid the sick in the market places, and besought him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were made well.

The hearts of the disciples were hardened and they did not understand about the loaves. Just as Elijah's heart had become hardened against Israel and he did not understand about the still, small voice of God. And just as the Corinthians' hearts had become hardened and they did not understand about the free gift of the Gospel. And just as our own hearts become hardened today, in the year of our Lord 2000, when we turn away from the sick, the poor and the oppressed, when we refuse to welcome each of God's beloved children, just as they are, and share with them the bread and wine of His sacrifice for all of us.

They laid the sick in the market places, and besought him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment.

I remember many times during the two years that I lived in Sénégal when people asked to touch me: my skin, because it was white; my hair, because it was long and straight, my clothing, because its texture and weave and colors were foreign. The adults were often more reticent, but the children always loved to touch. Several of them whiled away summer afternoons in plaiting my hair, a very difficult task because it was so slippery. Others, I think, considered it some kind of good luck charm to touch my face, or a bare arm. And certainly some hoped that I'd leave them my clothing when I returned home: a Peace Corps tradition.

In that part of the world, where community is more important than any individual, there's not the same sense of personal space and boundaries. Touching has a less intimate meaning than it does in the States. But still and all, at the end of a hot summer's day, when dozens of people have been touching you, you can feel a bit drained. Because you do, in a sense, impart some of your spirit to the person who touches you. And you receive some of their spirit in return. And there's grace in that. The medical community recognizes that infants who are denied human caresses grow up psychologically deformed. Anyone who's had a hairdresser shampoo and massage their scalp knows the healing power of those hands. Mary Magdalene knew that power when she washed the feet of her Lord and Saviour and dried them with her hair.

And yet, in our worldwide online communities, we rarely get the opportunity to actually touch each other, to share our spirits, to heal our wounds, however, whenever and by whomever they were inflicted. And that is why it's so important to draw each other into Christ's community, rather than to put stakes in the sand defining boundaries which keep some people out. The disciples' hearts were hardened, because they did not understand about the loaves. But immediately the townsfolk recognized him and ran about the whole neighborhood, bringing sick people on their pallets into the marketplace and as many as touched even the fringes of his garment were made whole.

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To mock your reign, O dearest Lord, they made a crown of thorns;  
set you with taunts along that road from which no one returns.  
They did not know, as we do now, that glorious is your crown;  
that thorns would flower upon your brow, your sorrows heal our own.

In mock acclaim, O gracious Lord, they snatched a purple cloak,  
your passion turned, for all they cared, into a soldier's joke.  
They did not know, as we do now, that though we merit blame  
you will your robe of mercy throw around our naked shame.

A sceptered reed, O patient Lord, they thrust into your hand,  
and acted out their grim charade to its appointed end.  
They did not know, as we do now, though empires rise and fall,  
your Kingdom shall not cease to grow till love embraces all.

(#170, Hymnal 1982)

*December 7, 2000 – St. Ambrose of Milan*

*Ecclesiasticus 2:7-18*

You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; do not stray, or else you may fall.  
You who fear the Lord, trust in Him, and your reward will not be lost.  
You who fear the Lord, hope for good things, for lasting joy and mercy.  
Consider the generations of old and see: has anyone trusted in the Lord and been disappointed?  
Or has anyone persevered in the fear of the Lord and been forsaken?  
Or has anyone called upon Him and been neglected? For the Lord is compassionate and merciful; He forgives sins and saves in time of distress.  
Woe to timid hearts and to slack hands, and to the sinner who walks a double path!  
Woe to the fainthearted who have no trust! Therefore they will have no shelter.  
Woe to you who have lost your nerve! What will you do when the Lord's reckoning comes?  
Those who fear the Lord do not disobey His words, and those who love Him keep His ways.  
Those who fear the Lord seek to please Him, and those who love Him are filled with His law.  
Those who fear the Lord prepare their hearts, and humble themselves before Him.  
Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, but not into the hands of mortals; for equal to His majesty is His mercy, and equal to His name are His works.

When my daughter Michèle was young we often took walks down to the bird sanctuary at Lake Merritt to feed the herons, egrets, pelicans, coots, ducks, Canada geese, Chinese geese, pheasant, quail and pigeons. Along our way was a house with a long cinder block retaining wall that separated the garden from the sidewalk. The wall followed an incline, so it materialized, as if by magic, out of the sidewalk at one end of the property, and terminated about three-and-a-half feet above the ground at the other end. Michèle loved to step up on that wall and run along it until she reached the high end. Then she'd leap off into my arms. She did this from the age of two until the age of eight.

At age two it was no problem for me to catch her on the fly and swing her down to the ground. But as she got older, this game became ever more dangerous. I'm not sure that she even realized the danger, although I certainly did. My anxiety level increased as she grew larger and bolder. One autumn Sunday afternoon a young man walked past us just as Michèle leapt. 'Such perfect trust,' he said to me. 'She knows you'll always catch her.'

We looked pretty incongruous, Michèle nearly as big as I was, clinging to my shoulders as she slid down my front. I think that day was the last time that I let her jump off the wall. Because, much as I truly wanted her to be able to trust that I'd always catch her, she was simply too big. And it was only a matter of time before I'd either drop her or

fall myself, injuring us both. So I was deceiving her by letting her believe that someone like me would always be there to catch her.

It's flattering to think that you're Godlike and can take responsibility for everything that might befall your family and friends: catch them whenever they leap, do their work for them, keep their secrets safe, make it all turn out right. But that's no more than idolatry.

The tricky part is that so often our friends and families ask us to play God, to let them fall into our hands. Or perhaps we see that they're in trouble and we generously offer to help them out. I no longer remember whether the idea for the jumping-off-the-wall-into-my-arms game originated with Michèle or with me. Chances are that the first time she got up on that wall and ran the length of it, she had no clear idea of how she'd get down. And so I would have suggested that she jump and I catch her.

And it was fun for us both. Like all children who are learning new skills, Michèle climbed, ran and leaped over and over again. And, like a good parent, I encouraged her. Eventually the falling into mother's hands game became a habit, an integral part of our weekly excursion to the lake to feed the birds.

As habits go, it seemed a good one at first. But, like most habits, it continued unchecked long after it had served its purpose and had become a hazard to our health. By that time it was difficult to break off without disrupting the rhythm of our walks together. Because we had to pass that retaining wall each time we went down to the lake, the temptation to run along it and leap off into my arms was simply irresistible to Michèle. She certainly was not going to stop relying on me to catch her on her own initiative. And I didn't have the heart to tell her that she was getting too heavy for me to catch, that it hurt my back, that my arms weren't strong enough anymore to hold on to her and lower her safely to the ground. It took an outside observer to jolt me to my senses.

God sometimes sends us these messengers: outside observers, like those in today's Gospel reading from St. Luke, who came to announce the bridegroom. The wise servants are waiting, alert and ready to hear the message. But the hearts and minds of the foolish servants are moving away from God and so they cannot listen. God loves us so very much, though, that He continues to send messengers. An accident or a sudden illness can be a warning signal that we've been tempted to the idolatry of thinking that we can do it all. Occasionally, a flash of intuition allows us to draw the parallel between someone else's disaster and the inevitable outcome of the path we ourselves are walking.

Today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures advises us to wait, trust and hope for one of those messengers. For no one who waits is forsaken, no one who trusts is disappointed and no one who hopes is neglected. The consequences of fearing God are that we fall into His merciful and gentle hands. But the consequences of timidity, slacking off, duplicity and losing our nerve are that we fall into the hands of those mortals who mistakenly think that their own mercy and gentleness is equal to God's. And it's only a matter of time before their hands can no longer catch us and bear us up. For

when we fall into their hands, we drag them down with us into the fruits of our idolatry, which is death.

What constitutes timidity, slacking off, duplicity and losing our nerve? In that falling game, our postmodern quasi-Christian perspective would dictate that I tough it out, stand firm and tall as Michèle's 85-pound body came hurtling like an arrow directly at my heart. Perhaps my family and friends would advise me to conquer my fear and lift weights in order to be strong enough to continue to catch Michèle. After all she's my only child, for whom I'd willingly given up my career, my friends, my belongings and for whom I'd most certainly sacrifice my life. Shouldn't I let her be my child forever, falling into the security of my open hands as often as she chose to leap off that wall?

God's perspective is quite different, though. If we always rescue our children, they never mature, they never learn how to raise responsible children of their own. The game of trust that Michèle and I played was a valuable lesson for her as a toddler, but a rather dangerous one for her as a youth. And an unfair one, as well. If I had dropped Michèle, she could have been seriously, perhaps permanently, injured, even killed. How could I risk her life and health? Imagine the guilt I would have felt, had she been hurt in any way.

On the other hand, if Michèle had inadvertantly knocked me down, she could have damaged me seriously. How irresponsible of me to put her in that position. Imagine the guilt she would have suffered for any unintentional harm she'd caused me. And who would provide for her if I were injured? Far better for me to show Michèle how to sit down on the edge of that retaining wall and slip slowly and carefully to the ground on her own.

In God's perspective, failure of nerve is our failure to speak out against wrongs, our failure to call a halt to dangerous games, our failure to refuse to perpetually rescue our friends and family from the consequences of their actions. It's certainly much easier to choose timidity, to jump in to their rescue at the drop of a hat, to adjust our lives, our souls and bodies to accommodate the perceived needs of those we love.

But empathy, valuable as it is for recognizing and understanding peoples' problems, rarely motivates them to change. And in the end we do no one any favors, least of all ourselves. For by repeatedly rescuing them we've caused our loved ones to fall into the hands of mortals, our own hands. And they've caused us to fall into their hands: also mortal. And none of us has fallen into the hands of the Lord.

St. Ambrose was no stranger to the temptations of timidity and loss of nerve. Throughout his life he found himself in positions of responsibility that he hadn't asked for, in tight spots with no clear way out. But Ambrose was anything but timid. He composed hymns whenever he found himself trapped. He gathered his congregation around him to sing the whole night through and together they chased away the demons. He stood up to emperors and armies. He took the hard road, even though he must often

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have been afraid, perhaps even unsure of himself. And on 7 december 397 Ambrose of Milan fell into the hands of the Lord.

Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, but not into the hands of mortals; for equal to His majesty is His mercy, and equal to His name are His works.

*Friday, April 6, 2001*

*Psalm 22*

*Jeremiah 20:7-13*

*John 10:31-42*

O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in and I cannot. For I hear many whispering, "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him." But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord! For He has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers." (Jeremiah 20:7-13)

Jeremiah is the quintessential prophet. The guy is either ranting or lamenting and frequently it's difficult to discern the difference. Unlike Mr. Nice-guy Isaiah, whose pastoral imagery plays a leading role in Handel's *Messiah*, Jeremiah is not so easy to set to music. He does, however, take center stage during Holy Week, as does the Psalm: 22. Today we have a little foretaste of Good Friday.

Jeremiah is lamenting the prophet's life here. He doesn't like his calling much. God leads him to say things that he knows in advance nobody's interested in hearing. His news is bad news, not good. Nonetheless, it's true. Jeremiah's vocation is to tell his community exactly what they don't want to hear and then to be beaten or reviled or thrown in prison, where God blesses him by requiring that he watch his own worst fears unfold in front of his eyes. Because Jeremiah isn't in a position to change anything. He can only see the outcome, he can't alter it.

True prophets, like Jeremiah, give signs as proof of their veracity. And in the chapter just before this one, God tells Jeremiah to buy a potter's earthenware jug, and to break it, as evidence that the Babylonians are going to destroy his people. Israel is that jug. And the priests are not too pleased with Jeremiah for breaking it, because they know that the jug symbolizes them. So they toss him into prison, where he's a laughingstock, mocked by all passersby.

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‘Take this cup away,’ Jeremiah begs. ‘I can’t do this anymore, there’s no point to it. I’m beating my head against a brick wall, and for what good? I wouldn’t mind the mockery, the jeers, the laughter, the prison, if these people would only change their hearts. But what purpose does it serve to break me and destroy them, too?’

And then the spirit of God overpowers him yet again, like a burning fire, and he can’t help himself. ‘Violence and destruction,’ he cries, tears running down his face. ‘Please listen to me. If you turn back now, all will be forgiven. Repent and be saved. Do you really think your God enjoys this game?’

Each time that Jeremiah gives Israel one of his signs, the people grow wilder. They can see that he’s telling them the truth, but they just don’t want to change. They’re not yet ready to give up what they consider to be their entitlement. So they figure that if they kill God’s messenger, they’ll somehow avoid His wrath. They imagine that it’s Jeremiah himself who’s the problem. And they bide their time, waiting for the opportunity to denounce him to the proper authorities, to deliver him up to his torture and death.

And so Jeremiah calls on the Lord. ‘If they won’t listen, Lord, why not destroy them now and get it over with? No sense dragging it out, leaving me here hanging out to dry. Show the people that You’ve blessed the righteous ones, the ones who sing Your praises. Show the people that You’ve cursed the evildoers. You can see they’re not listening to me, even though the words in my mouth are Your words and the signs that I give them are Your signs. I’m not asking this for my sake, Lord. I know better than to think that they’ll listen to me the next time around. Been there, done that, bought the tunic, worn it out.’

The church should honor her prophets, but she doesn’t. Instead she reviles them. Why? Because they shame her with the truth and that makes her crazy. It means that she either has to change or else silence them. And the church resists change, with every fiber of her being, up until the bitter end. And so you can see how easy it is for the poor folk who are called to the vocation of prophecy to get cynical and discouraged. To be tempted to just walk away from it all, refusing to look back. Or worse still, to stick around returning evil for evil.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.  
(Psalm 22:1-2.)

When I was a child I had two recurrent nightmares. In the first one, words fell apart. All kinds of benign words, like flower and mother and father, exploded in sound and light and I woke up screaming, bathed in sweat. In the second, a plane fell from the sky into the woods across the street from the house that I grew up in, the yellow house on Morley Road, the one which had no address, just a rural delivery route number for Concord Township in Ohio.

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I always awoke crying my heart out from this second dream. I cried because that plane flew low over our house and I could see the flames inside it, the children with looks of horror on their faces. And I ran to my parents and begged them to help me. ‘Look at that plane, it’s on fire,’ I’d say. It’s going to crash in the woods and everyone in it will die. Call the fire department now, so they can get there in time to rescue the children. Please.’

‘What are you talking about, you dreamer?’ my father would ask. There’s nothing wrong with that plane.’

‘Can’t you see the flames?’ I’d cry.

‘That’s the reflection of the afternoon sun on its wings,’ he’d answer.

‘Can’t you hear it?’ I’d ask. ‘It just crashed in the woods, and the children are burning. Listen! You can hear them screaming.’

‘That was a sonic boom,’ my father would reply. ‘Some plane just broke the sound barrier. And there’s a siren just now. The fire department got a call, I suppose. No one’s screaming. Human beings don’t sound like that.’

‘In the woods across the street. All that smoke! Can’t you smell the burning flesh?’

‘Someone’s having a barbeque. It’s summer time. O my God, you’re throwing up. Do you have a headache? Alice, she’s throwing up again. Why do you let her stay shut up in her room all day reading so many books? She gets these headaches and then she throws up, damn it.’

And so I’d awaken crying. Crying for the people who could have been saved. And for the rabbits and bobcats, the robins and bluejays, the poplars and the willows, and the flashing fish in the creek. Crying for the children, whose visions or voices were belittled and ignored. And crying for the adults, who refused to change their hearts, even as they cleaned up the wreckage.

How often we discount the words of truth that our children speak. We can’t see or hear what they can see and hear, so we, being adults, assume that we’re right. And that the children are the ones with limitations, the ones who are in the wrong, the ones with the problem. We’re not predisposed to pay attention to them so it really doesn’t matter how articulate or fervent they are. We treat all outsiders the same way, actually. The woman in an all-male group is perennially the one considered out of touch. The young adult among elders is routinely patronized. The members of minority races or ethnic groups or economic classes or sexual orientations are the targets of our amusement or outrage or worse.

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And yet, these are the very people whom Jesus chose to consort with. And the outcasts were, more often than not, Israel's true prophets. Jesus Himself was a true prophet, and His flaunting of society's rules got Him into no end of difficulties, as today's Gospel reading tells us. Long before the high priests conspired to crucify Him, various crowds who'd been the beneficiaries of His miracles tried to push Him off cliffs, stone Him, or trick him into condemning Himself.

It was no different in Jesus' time than in the days of Jeremiah. And 2000 years later it's still the same old same old. To quote Molly Ivins from her April 3rd column, *Election Denial*: 'The single most dangerous thing you can do in politics is shut off information from people who don't agree with you. Surround yourself with sycophants, listen only to the yea-sayers ... then stick a fork in it, you're done.' The single most dangerous thing the church can do is to shut off information from people who don't agree with her. The single most dangerous thing that we as individuals can do is to surround ourselves with sycophants, listen only to the yea-sayers.

We just can't handle the truth, it seems. We don't much like success, either. When someone else is efficient and competent or worse still, visionary, our own inadequacies are revealed and we get irresistible urges to silence them, shed their blood, make them pay, restore the status quo. The church should honor her prophets, but she doesn't. Instead she reviles them.

As we enter this last week of Lent, the one in which Jesus finally transcends the boundaries between life and death, may we find new ways to listen to the prophets among us, new forms of transcending the artificial boundaries we've created within our sacred and secular communities, new commitments to the radical, subversive and transforming message of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works. (John 10:37-38)

*December 9, 2001*

The lessons for Advent II, Year A, are at once consoling and terrifying. Isaiah speaks of the wolf and lamb living together, the leopard lying down with the kid, the calf and lion and fatling hanging out and a little child leading them. Perhaps because I'm a vegetarian I immediately noticed that it's the adult carnivores here who are nestling up to the baby herbivores. It's not just meat-eater versus plant-eater, it's the biggest and meanest of the meat-eaters facing off against the tenderest and most fragile of the plant-eaters.

I remember a time with my daughter, in the Lawrence Hall of Science, in Berkeley. There was an exhibit of robotic dinosaurs, very lifelike, and quite large. Michèle loved dinos and was perhaps four or five years old at the time. She wore a blue print dress and she ran right up to a brontosaurus (one of the plant-eaters) and hugged its tail. This wasn't allowed, actually, but she did it so quickly that I didn't have time to stop her. Her long blonde hair, in cute little barrettes, tickled the dino's tail and, as if in response, he twitched it, sending her flying. As she spun around she saw a Tyrannosaurus Rex across the room, rearing and roaring.

She started to cry. 'What will happen when they turn out the lights?' she asked me. 'They have vicious meat-eaters in the same room with the poor plant-eaters.'

I was stumped. I realized that these robots were way too lifelike and it didn't seem likely that I could convince Michèle that they weren't real. So I said: 'You know how at Lake Merritt every afternoon the park rangers bring out their buckets of fish to feed the pellicies and egrets and herons? Well, I think they have very big buckets of fish here for T Rex. He'll be fat and sleepy tonight, he won't be interested in Pronto Bronto.'

Isaiah says something similar, actually. Before the mortal enemies cuddle up for the night, the Lord will have come and judged the earth with righteousness. He will return His creation to equity and the wicked will be blown away. Those who are left will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, and whatever meanness they had will be disarmed, defanged.

That's the good news. St. John the Baptist (or San Juan Bautista as we call him here in California) has a slightly different take, in the Gospel according to Matthew. He's the voice crying in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight His paths. Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.

Compared to John the Baptist, Isaiah is a plant-eater. John is insane, like one of those Velociraptors in Jurassic Park. The ones who hunted in packs and learned from each other, they killed for sport rather than mere hunger, the relentless ones.

Yet a bunch of the people from Jerusalem and its surrounding towns, even throughout all Judea, were going out to the desert to confess their sins to this crazy

prophet. They wanted to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. It was such a popular pastime, that not just the ascetics, outsiders and marginalized came to John. Not only the usual suspects arrived there in the desert to watch him eat his wild honey and locusts. Eventually even the Pharisees and Sadducees, those holy and righteous and blessed and privileged men, showed up at his cave. And John was not pleased. He wasn't in a popularity contest, you see. He wasn't one of those TV evangelists who notches their belt for every soul saved, every body healed, every dollar collected.

Like Jesus would later do, John calls the priests and teachers and holy men of his time and culture a brood of vipers. 'Sycophants,' he says. 'There is no cheap grace here. Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Don't just make a pilgrimage out to the desert and think that will absolve you of your sins. A change of heart is required. Repent. Turn from your evil ways.'

Being descendents of Abraham, the Pharisees and Sadducees thought that they were in like Flynn. They were the privileged and naturally Yahweh had saved them a place at the table. You can imagine them murmuring: 'Who is this upstart prophet? How dare he refuse us, God's frozen chosen, this baptism? We know the drill. In every generation Yahweh sends us His prophets and we bow and scrape to them and Yahweh is placated and goes away until it's time to bother our children and our children's children. We have a right to this new-fangled baptism ritual, whatever it is.'

John is not impressed. 'Clueless,' he shouts. 'You are all clueless. You think that I'm the Messiah and so you come out here for my water baptism ceremony. But just you wait. The true Messiah is holier and crazier than I am. You think this camel-hair shirt is all that? Wait until He comes. In His hand is a winnowing fork and He'll thresh you like grain. The slackers and the scrubs amongst you will be consumed by fire. And He will raise up from the stones of His granary floor new Sons of Abraham to take your places at His holy table.'

Repent, I tell you, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

If you read the Hebrew Scriptures with even the least attention, it's difficult to ignore the message that God's justice will not be an affirming experience for the propertied class. If there's a consistency of voice among the prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, Jonah, Hosea) it's that God's vengeance is upon those who've cheated the widow, enslaved the orphan, oppressed the resident alien. And, if anything, Jesus is even more outspoken and insistent.

'What you do for the least of these my brethren, you do for me. And what you failed to do for the least of them, you did not do for me,' He says.

And, 'Not all who call me Lord are my own.'

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The people of Jesus' day believed that the end of time was at hand. They thought that their lives would be cut short. When you believe that your days are numbered, your priorities change dramatically.

Each time that we worship together, we pray the Lord's Prayer, the one prayer that Jesus taught His disciples to say. And in it are these words: 'Thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.' We pray for God's justice to pour down like fountains. We pray for that winnowing fork and that refiner's fire.

Each Advent we wait to celebrate the Birth of Christ, our God who humbled Himself to be born as all humans are born, and to be laid in a manger, in the midst of the animals, in the dark of night, in the cold, dry season. Each Advent we also await the Second Coming of Christ. Who is this Messiah we await?

What is the crying at Jordan?  
Who hears, O God, the prophecy?  
Dark is the season, dark our hearts  
and shut to mystery.

Who then shall stir in this darkness,  
prepare for joy in the winter night?  
Mortal in darkness we lie down,  
blind-hearted seeing no light.

Lord, give us grace to awake us,  
to see the branch that begins to bloom;  
in great humility is hid  
all heaven in a little room.

Now comes the day of salvation,  
in joy and terror the Word is born!  
God gives himself into our lives;  
O let salvation dawn!

(The Hymnal 1982, #69: text by Carol Christopher Drake and tune by Norman Mealy, St. Mark's Berkeley)

### *Isaiah 11:1-10*

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall

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kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

### *Psalm 72:1-8*

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.  
May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.  
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.  
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.  
May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.  
May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.  
In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.  
May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

### *Romans 15:4-13*

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

As it is written, 'Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name'; and again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people'; and again, 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him'; and again Isaiah says, 'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.'

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May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### *Matthew 3:1-12*

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

*Saturday, March 9th, 2002 – St. Gregory of Nyssa*

*Psalm 19:7-11(12-14)*

*Wisdom 7:24-28*

*John 14:23-26*

Reading the lessons appointed for the Feast of St. Gregory of Nyssa reminded me of three anthems: Heinrich Schuetz's setting of Psalm 19, *The Heavens Are Telling*, Thomas Tallis' *If Ye Love me, Keep My Commandments* and Everett Titcomb's *I Will Not Leave You Comfortless*.

The first I sang many years ago with my university choir. One of the highlights of our Iberian Tour during my sophomore year of college was singing that jewel of the German Baroque in the Alhambra. Just for fun. The second one I sang in my old church choir, on Trinity Sunday of 2000. It was one of our choirmaster's many secret messages to us. The things that he couldn't bring himself to say in words, he revealed to us in music. And the last one I sang every Pentecost for five years, beginning in 1996 and ending in 2000. It was our choirmaster's perennial choice for communion anthem, and we sang it from the back of the church, standing in a circle around the baptismal font, with the choristers' children (and, sometimes, grandchildren) in the middle.

It has a lovely alto line.

I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you yet again. Alleluia. And your heart shall be joyful. Alleluia.

Our choirmaster altered it so that we began with the second Alleluia, as well as ending with it, making an A-B-A frame around the promise of the Holy Spirit. And also allowing us to sing Alleluia three times: for the Trinity. Organists' humor. He always liked to sneak us extra Alleluias to make up for having to give them up for Lent. On Easter Day in 1998 our anthem was Randall Thompson's *Alleluia*: nothing but Alleluia, a cappella, in four-part harmony, and in every dynamic known to man. With a repeat performance on Transfiguration Sunday 2001.

When Christ left His disciples He consoled them in their loss with the gift of the third person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit, variously known as the Comforter, the Counselor, the Paraclete. In the Hebrew tradition this is the personification of Wisdom, or the Greek's Sophia.

Ever since the death and resurrection of Christ, the Church has struggled over the meaning of grace. Are we saved by faith alone and therefore can do exactly as we please here on earth? Or do we work out our salvation in fear and trembling? St. Augustine of Hippo, for most of his life, was a proponent of faith alone. However, towards the end he realized that the implication of such a theology was that most people failed to grow. And

sin is, essentially, the refusal to change and to grow. Nowadays we jokingly refer to Augustine's faith and no works proposition as The Doctrine of Christian Mediocrity.

St. Gregory of Nyssa also gave precedence to faith, based on his interpretation of the Exodus story. He actually believed that both faith and works were necessary, though. And Martin Luther had his own Trinitarian formula: *Sola scriptura, sola fides, sola gratias*. Only Scripture, only faith, only grace.

Various denominations place heavier emphasis on faith or works, but the reality is, as Christ says in John's Gospel, that if we love Him, we'll keep His commandments. And if we don't, we won't. Our works are intimately connected with our faith. To love Christ we have no choice but to follow His example, and serve the least of those in our midst. Just as, if we want to be generous, we have no choice but to practice generosity. If we want to conquer our own depression or despair, we must first reach out in compassion and learn to care for others. And if we want to have a friend, we start by being one.

Luckily, it's not necessary to be healed oneself in order to heal others. If it were, we'd all be permanently stuck in our brokenness, as Dante portrays the denizens of hell in his *Inferno*. And, interestingly, the residents of the lowest of his nine circles, those damned souls perpetually locked in combat with Satan, aren't the lustful, the wrathful, the envious, the slothful, the idolatrous or even the greedy. The worst sinners of all are the betrayers: those who have claimed to love Christ but have refused to keep His commandments. The 'I can do as I please because all that matters is I'm saved' crowd.

It's one of those holy paradoxes, that the more you open yourself to others, the more of yourself you give, the more you have left to give. St. Francis of Assisi expressed this in his prayer: 'O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.' Our actions do make a difference, for better and for worse.

There are no shortcuts, either. No matter how much musical aptitude you inherited, if you don't practice, you won't be a concert pianist. No matter how good a sight-reader you are, if you don't attend rehearsals, you won't be able to carry your part in a choir. And no matter how creative you are at improvisation, if you aren't disciplined enough to write down your compositions, they'll die with the sound of the final note. You can't just form a committee to sit around and talk about it, you have to actually do it.

And likewise, you can't buy or sell love. You can only love and be loved.

In my experience, it's always and only at the times that I'm least able to love that I'm called on to truly love, to sacrifice. It's in our weaknesses that God works, not in our strengths. There's no flowering, no growth, no fruit, in certainty. Only through doubt do we risk seeing the Christ in others. And it's in bowing down to worship the Christchild in those others that we discover that we ourselves are the other. As Jacques Lacan (though

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not a theologian) said (with a grammatical emphasis): ‘I is another. Je est un autre.’ A concise way of illustrating that we are our brothers’ keepers.

At a time in my life when I had so little money that I didn’t know how I’d pay my bills, Christ sent a homeless woman and her son to my door. Once I was so deep in despair that I was killing myself through anorexia and alcohol and so God gave me a child to raise. And when prayer had simply become to me the order of words and the sound of the voice praying, the Holy Spirit sent me people who, though they often had difficulty expressing it, needed and wanted my most fervent of prayers.

In each of these cases I had a choice. I could share with the homeless mother and child, who definitely had greater need than I did, or I could hold fast to my little portion. I could give up my baby, through abortion or adoption, or I could keep her. I could offer to pray for others (and prayer involves action, not just words) or I could simply ignore their needs and do nothing. The first choice in each situation assumes a model of abundance, which engenders love, vulnerability and inclusion; the second a model of scarcity, which breeds fear and safety through exclusion. The secular world, especially our civic religion of capitalism in the USofA, encourages us to believe in the scarcity model. But Christ’s parables all speak of trusting a model of abundance.

On a Saturday evening in January I experienced the fruits of a congregation’s trust in a model of abundance at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, in San Francisco. I was a guest at their Feast of Friends liturgy. Normally this service takes place on the evening of Tuesday in Holy Week. It’s actually their commemoration of the Last Supper, but it’s so unique and intimate that they don’t hold it on Maundy Thursday proper. As it happened, though, this particular service was part of an international conference on liturgy and music, hosted by St. Gregory’s. So there were 35-odd visitors, about half of the congregation that evening.

The liturgy centered around the meal: a feast of friends. We ate, broke ceremonial bread and drank wine. We heard readings, sang hymns and chanted, participated in an interactive homily on St. Aelred of Rievaulx, whose feast day it was, and washed each others’ feet, ending with a liturgical dance.

Imagine sitting around one of ten or so tables, singing *Tomorrow Shall be My Dancing Day*, a *cappella*, in four-part harmony. Well, except for the first and last verses, which tasteful Anglicans sing in unison. Imagine baskets of bitter herbs and fragrant spices on each table, with 30 or 40 Ethiopian Processional Crosses surrounding the entrance to the sanctuary and a fresco of dancing saints -- the communion of saints -- circling the nave. Imagine sharing in the spiritual journeys of the other people at the table, learning not only their names, birthplaces, professions and ages, but also the details of a particular time in their lives when they’d been chosen as someone’s friend. Imagine being invited into this community, respected enough to be given responsibility for setting tables, or serving food or preparing for the footwashing ceremony.

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When I consider the many liturgies I've experienced in the most famous cathedrals and abbeys in England, Spain, Portugal, Canada and the US, I think that this Feast of Friends at St. Gregory Nyssen in San Francisco was the most beautiful, the most moving, the most true. Christ charged us, if we loved Him, to keep His commandments. And those commandments are few and simple to recite, although perhaps extremely difficult to fulfill. We're to love God, with all our hearts and souls and minds and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we're to remember Him when we share a meal with friends.

By eating the bread, the symbol of His Body, and by drinking the wine, the symbol of His Blood, He becomes a part of us, and we of Him, and of everyone else who also shares this bread and wine. Since we're all connected, all a part of each other, we cannot betray another person without harming ourselves. We cannot simply do as we please. And neurology tells us why. When we're in relationship with others, our brains are physically altered by that relationship. And any damage that we do to others hurts us, as well. Although in the short term it might seem profitable to harm another in order to benefit ourselves, in the long run, we'll either kill the other person or the relationship. We, literally, have no choice but to follow Christ's commandments.

Another mystic, St. Teresa of Avila reminds us: 'Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world. Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which He is to bless His people now.'

In thanksgiving for St. Gregory Nyssen Episcopal Church in San Francisco, California, and for its co-rectors: Donald Schell and Rick Fabian.

### *Psalm 19:7-14*

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever;  
the ordinances of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.  
Moreover by them is thy servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.  
But who can discern his errors? Clear thou me from hidden faults.  
Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!  
Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.  
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight,  
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

*Wisdom 7:24-28*

For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.

*John 14:23-26*

Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me. “These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

*Saturday, March 23rd, 2002 – St. Gregory the Illuminator*

*Psalm 98:1-4*

*Acts 17:22-31*

*Matthew 5:11-16*

Today's Gospel reading reminds me of a listsib who recently died: Matt Tracy, the late Rector of St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, on Lovers Lane in Dallas, Texas. Like all of us, Matt had a family and friends. He was more than just his vocation and profession.

Some people mask the details of their humanity on discussion lists. But Matt not only was fully transparent online, he actually invented new personae for himself. On Anglicans Online Matt adopted many roles. He was list geographer, and drew the borders of the Republic of Texas (ROT) so broadly that it included everyone, regardless of time zones, coasts (east, west, north, south or left) and native tongues. He was the arbiter of true BBQ, even for those of us vegetarians. He spoke for himself with clarity and force and generally came out on the side of moderation. And occasionally he spoke for his alter ego, that evil twin: Mutton L. Mer, Jr (aka Mutt+).

A true INTJ, Matt had his nose in the canons and rubrics. Order was important to him, yet some of his funniest stories originated from the chaos of his real life. In a thread on liturgical disasters, he described himself genuflecting at the altar, then stepping on his cope as he stood up, only to fall back on his butt. A new liturgical dance, perhaps, or a modern drama, because Matt acted as if that slip had been perfectly normal, and the mass went on.

I never met Matt in person. I got to know him, though, on April 28th in 1999, when he was in the midst of a list fight and had just called himself an a\*\*\*\*\*. I begged to differ and so we started up an offlist conversation. We talked about our kids, our real lives (secular and spiritual), our parishes, our passions, our hopes for the future. But what I remember most clearly is a post in which Matt posited that if he were to say 'God is Love' on Anglican, a flame war would erupt. And he went on to describe the course of that war, in a hilarious parody of our old, tired threads.

Matt was right. There are always some on Anglican who are ready to flame people for who they are, despite the contents of their posts. Flamethrowers typically shoot before aiming. And they invariably burn themselves. It's an act of singular stupidity to refuse to listen to anything a particular person has to say, to intentionally do the opposite, to disregard their every word. Yet, amazingly, it happens here and rather often. And the clergy aren't exempt.

Matt was not one of those people, but he was sometimes their target. And that's one of the reasons why today's Gospel reminds me of him.

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Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Interesting word, blessed. It comes from the old English word for blood--blood ritually shed in consecration. In French the verb *blessier* means “to wound” and the noun *blessé* is an actual wound. The Angel blessed Jacob by injuring his leg. Blessings are tangible: outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. In a word, sacraments.

And if people revile and persecute you, you are wounded: in spirit if not in flesh. Yet when those injuries are undeserved, God grants you justice in heaven. There’s consolation here on earth, as well, if you can remember that prophets are always mistreated. Christ Himself was threatened with death on several occasions, and not only by the high priests. Never underestimate the power of guilty consciences projected against the messenger.

And never underestimate the evil perpetrated by those who believe that they’re privy to the mind of God. The opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty. Those who stoned and mocked and persecuted the prophets were certain that they were right and God’s prophets were wrong. Those who called for Jesus’ crucifixion were certain, too.

But it was the prophets, and Jesus Himself, who expressed doubts. In the end, the certain were revealed as false. Time has proved the religious zealots wrong. And in our own day the institutional church routinely betrays Christ. All the more reason to sing a new song: ‘Down with religion and up with God’. *Cantate Dominum, canticum novum*.

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men.

I think it’s safe to begin with the assumption that this passage is metaphor, figurative language. Christ isn’t saying that human beings are *NaCl*, sodium chloride, the chemicals which compose salt molecules. Still, identifying it as metaphor, rather than a literal truth, doesn’t automatically reveal Christ’s meaning.

Nowadays we take this saying of His to mean that we’re rather ordinary, even common. We are the salt of the earth. Not the aristocracy, not the priesthood, not even the professional class. We’re merely one of many, the laos of God.

Much like the misguided and patronizing attitude that some clergy take towards the laity, our culture doesn’t much value salt. It’s ubiquitous: table salt, iodized salt, sea salt, kosher salt, popcorn salt, rock salt, epsom salts. But this is a recent development in western civilization, which dates only to the advent of refrigeration. Odd, how our many

cherished interpretations and sacred traditions reveal themselves, upon closer inspection, to be mere novelties.

Just as we think that it's historical to read Scripture literally, when, in reality, for the first thousand years after Christ's death it was only ever read as allegory. Same with the Qu'ran and the Hebrew Scriptures, by the way. The relentlessly literal interpretation of sacred books is one of those medieval accretions, similar in nature to the appearance of fundamentalism in the 19th century as a reaction to the Enlightenment.

Anyway, in Christ's day salt was extremely valuable, more valuable than silver or gold, in fact. Salt meant life.

It was used to preserve food. And in that desert environment you couldn't travel without carrying your own preserved food.

Salt was also prescribed as an essential element of sacrifices in Torah. Interestingly enough it acts as a sort of spiritual leaven. Alone it has an unpleasant flavour, but added to foods it enhances their natural flavours. Unlike honey, which tastes sweet and is quite pleasant in appearance, but masks the natural flavour of foods, salt is an instrument of transformation. It illustrates that a quality which may appear negative in isolation, becomes positive in community. In order to be kosher, meat must be salted. The salt draws the blood out of the meat, transforming its purpose, leavening it, making it suitable for consumption. Elsewhere in Scripture, Israel is described as a leaven for the earth itself. So in essence, salt is a metaphor for Israel: the spiritual leaven of righteousness, sincerity and truth, as we sing in the Easter Antiphon.

As its third benefit, salt in the diet allowed the body to retain water. In the desert fresh drinking water was (and still is) difficult to find. So people stored their own, as camels do, against storms and other hard times. Without salt, death from dehydration would have been prevalent. If you were a nomad lacking the necessary salt, no amount of money would save your life.

Salt was an essential element for survival and, as such, it was precious. Which is why the Romans paid their troops' wages in salt, giving us the word "salary".

The names of various cities in the ancient Roman Empire reveal the prominent part that salt played in the minds of those folks. Salzburg, Austria is the City of Salt, for example. Everywhere that the root Sal, Salz, Sau, Sault or Hal is found is a place of salt, an ancient mine.

You are the salt of the earth. You are extremely valuable because you have the ability to transform and preserve life. But if salt has lost its savour, of what value is it? It's of no more use than the sand underneath our feet. If we've lost our distinctive flavour, our gifts of the Spirit, there's no way to restore us. A frightening thought.

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Today salt is merely a seasoning. Or perhaps it's used temporarily in the making of ice cream, to be discarded with the slush. We may add it to hot water to soak a tired body or soothe an aching throat, and then wash it down the drain. Or, if we live in a place where winter brings snow, salt may melt the icy, snowy roads so that we can drive. But it also rusts our cars: an unintended consequence.

Salt has a bad rap nowadays. Doctors advise us to avoid it, for the sake of our blood pressure. Yet a mere century ago, meats and fish were encrusted with the stuff to make them edible, if not exactly fresh. Vegetables were soaked in brine at harvest time and kept around for the winter. We forget how essential salt is to our survival until we catch the flu and get dehydrated. Drinking water alone won't restore us, then. We need to add back in those chemicals, like salt, that maintain our blood at the appropriate ratio of electrolytes. Otherwise our autonomic nervous system, our reptilian brain, can't keep its electrical neurons firing and our hearts beating.

The level of salt in sea water is the exact level of salt in our bloodstream. Which is one reason why we're instinctively attracted to oceans.

And this leads to the precept that a salty tongue is a precious commodity. The ability to speak clearly and directly, using shocking language on occasion, is an essential aspect of discernment. Jesus isn't impressed by the bland speech or pious platitudes of the flatterers. He is impressed by the salt of the earth, those who don't hesitate to name bad behaviour, to call people a\*\*\*\*\*s, if that's what it takes to get their attention.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Another metaphor. In ancient times people worshipped the sun. Which isn't surprising, because without the sun there is also no life. The daily and yearly cycles of the earth's rotation around the sun give us the warmth necessary for survival, the light necessary for photosynthesis. If you doubt the importance of the sun, think of how many people suffer from seasonal affective disorder. Our biological clocks and our emotions both depend on light.

Clearly the Hebrew peoples held the sun in high regard. It's the first of God's creations: Let there be light. So for Christ to call us the light of the world associates us with this essential characteristic of God: light, vision, clarity. For a people that lived without benefit of electricity, who relied on fires for warmth in the cold desert nights, this was quite a compliment. Several of their traditional festivals involved the miracle of light. What a gift to be considered a light, to have talents worthy of revealing God to others.

In Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, there are four different genres of stained glass, reflecting the different people and times that they were designed and constructed.

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The earliest are by Charles Connick and resemble those in Saint Chappelle in France. They're of the ancient technique of painting on glass. Marguerite Willet designed the second set, in the rear of the nave. The Willet windows are more modern looking, but still in the original stained, or painted, style. But Gabriel Loire created the rose window and those in the clerestory, using his new technique of faceted glass. And Narcisso Quagliati just this past year created our last window, a Madonna with a galaxy in her womb. Giving new meaning to the phrase: You are the light of the world.

Gabriel Loire's faceted glass windows are actually chunks of colored glass embedded in concrete, rather than lead. In this way they become an integral part of the Cathedral's structure. And their varied thicknesses and textures, the points where they're beveled or chipped, cause them to become prisms for the exterior sunlight. They each magnify even the dimmest daylight, a brilliant solution for foggy San Francisco. And a perfect symbol for the church. Each of us comes together in community, with our unique gifts, shapes, sizes and colors, and out of the muck of our own individual lives. And together we become prisms for God's light and love.

One of Loire's windows is actually installed outside the sacristy and backlit, so that we can see it as we go about our duties as liturgical ministers. We can even reach out and touch it if we want to. It's the Samaritan woman at the well, considered by many to be the first apostle. She's the woman whom Christ knew and loved for who she was. And the one He sent back to tell the men, the powerbrokers, the ritually clean, that they were searching for love in all the wrong places.

If the Samaritan woman had acted as a female of her station was expected to, she would never have dared return to her home and confront those men with the truth. If she'd followed the rules of the game, if she'd hidden her light beneath a bushel, if she'd stayed silent about whom she'd seen and what she'd heard, we wouldn't be telling her story to this day. She'd have been just another anonymous first century woman who lived and died without making a difference.

Just as with salt (where if the savour is gone, the salt is useless), if our light is hidden, we're useless, we've wasted our precious lives. In a word, we've been poor stewards of God's gifts to us, God's gift of us. Even if our lights seem to us or to others small and weak, by joining in community we can magnify their power. We can become prisms of God's love. Let your light so shine, Jesus says, that people may see your good works and glorify God. *Cantate Dominum, canticum novum.*

In memoriam: Manton Lee Tracy, Jr. *Dona ei requiem et lux perpetua luceat ei.*

*Psalm 98:1-4*

O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things!  
His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.  
The LORD has made known his victory,

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he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.  
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.  
All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.  
Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;  
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

### *Acts 17:22-31*

So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.”

### *Matthew 5:11-16*

Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.