

Reflections on Faith and Life for Advent 4, 2020

One of our readings for last Sunday was from chapter 5 of I Thessalonians (5:16-18): **Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.** I invite you to read Steve Garnaas-Holmes' *Unfolding Light* devotional on those verses from December 10th.

*Seriously? Even with all the crud in the world?
Yes. In the rock-paper-scissors of life
joy cuts sorrow, crushes despair, and swallows crud.
Grieve first...and joy comes with the morning (Psalm 30:5b)*

*These are hard days. But joy is bigger than these days.
Joy is not happiness with present circumstances,
but harmony with the goodness of God
and the overflowing of God's delight in us.
Joy includes the universe,
and all its beauty and sorrow.
Joy dances with gratitude.
Joy plays with hope, which is trust in the unseen.
Joy sings with love, which is self-giving for another.
What joy!*

*Yes, people are suffering, and others don't care.
But some do. Rejoice!
You can rejoice during a pandemic.
You can give thanks at a funeral.
You can be joyful in prison.
You can lament suffering and injustice, and rejoice.
For joy is the healing of broken hearts,
the breaking of chains, the opening of graves,
the coming of God.*

*Christ does not come to make us happy,
but to stand with us in the pain of life
until joy like a seed rises.*

All is swallowed up in joy.

(Please read other side)

This is the annual Christmas message from Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Elizabeth Eaton.

Bishop Eaton and several others from the ELCA went to Honduras to observe the work of AMMPARO (*Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities*); this is the ELCA's strategy to help youth who have been forced to flee their home countries because of violence, abuse, extortion by gangs, and extreme poverty. This particular meeting was also attended by the Lutheran World Federation and Mennonites, working to resettle "returned migrants," those who had tried to seek asylum in the United States but had failed or been denied and deported back to Honduras.

"One by one they told us their stories of fear and desperation. Not one undertook the long and dangerous trek north on a whim. They told us about the abuse they'd suffered, about family members who'd been killed by gangs, about the inability to make a living because of extortion by organized crime. They talked about the bitter sadness of leaving home and family, and the uncertainty of the future.

I remember one young woman who was pregnant when she tried to migrate to the United States. She had the baby somewhere along the way, far from home, alone, and desperately wanting her mother to be with her. None of this is what she'd hoped for when she was growing up. Circumstances beyond her control had forced her into this new and strange existence. She and her baby were now back in Honduras—but not at home. Home was too dangerous.

Remember our last Christmas? Remember all the preparations, the travel to be with family? Remember the holy beauty of the Christmas Eve service and receiving Christ's grace and forgiveness at his table? The shopping and Christmas caroling, the in-person gatherings? All that has changed. The pandemic hasn't forced us *from* our homes, but *into* our homes, sheltering in place, isolated. Not gathered with family and friends, but forced apart because of the threat of infection. Forced by circumstances beyond our control into this strange existence. Oh, there will be Christmas carols piped into grocery stores and other essential services, but they will be painful reminders of how life used to be.

I told the young Honduran mother about another young woman who was forced to leave home because of a government decree. She, too, was pregnant and made a long and difficult journey. She, too, was far from home and without her mother when the baby came. She had to find shelter wherever she could. This wasn't what she had hoped for when she was growing up. Circumstances beyond her control had forced her into this new existence. That young woman was Mary, and the child was Jesus.

Precisely in our distress, in our dislocation, the Lord shows up. Emmanuel—God with us—makes his home in the very places we find foreign or isolating. The young Honduran woman, and all of us, can find hope because of the birth of Mary's child. There is no "God-forsaken place," and we are never alone—not in hospital rooms, or sheltering in place, or Zoom calls or on dangerous roads. Many of us will not be physical home for Christmas. But we all are truly home in Christ."