

The Servant



*Michael the Archangel,
Leader of the Hosts of Heaven*

#257

Michaelmas – Advent 2020

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Where there's a will

You can assist and further the ministries of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory by remembering the community in your will. If you choose to do so, the following form of wording is appropriate:

I hereby give, devise, and bequeath to The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, Inc., a New York State not-for-profit corporation and its successors for ever \$_____ and / or _____ percent of my estate to be used in such a manner as determined by its Directors.



Members of the Brotherhood gather for Virtual Convocation 2020.

Community Notes

Annual Convocation 2020 – Virtual

For the first time in the Brotherhood's fifty-one year history, Annual Convocation took place via Zoom video conferencing, from beginning to end. While we had hoped that the COVID-19 pandemic would have been a thing of the past by mid-summer, that turned out to be a wish unfulfilled. The Brotherhood's planning team had hoped and prepared for holding at least one part of the annual gathering at Saint Mary's Episcopal Church in Bonita Springs, Florida, where postulant Thomas Burnham was to be received into the novitiate, and two new postulants were to be admitted, all at a live-streamed Evening Prayer. However, the count of COVID-19 infections rising across Florida led to canceling the live liturgy, and instead opting for virtual Evening Prayer, including the Rites of Reception and Admission, which all members could attend online. So, at a few minutes before 5:00 PM on the appointed day, the community gathered via Zoom as Minister Provincial Bo Alexander Armstrong of the Diocese of East Tennessee began the office of Evening Prayer.

At the traditional place in this office, Minister General Richard Thomas Biernacki of New Jersey began the Rites with the preamble to the Rule of the Brotherhood, setting forth the fundamental purpose of the religious life as the Brotherhood understands it and participates in it:

To be a brother is to become a witness to the love of God in your every living moment; to live humbly, with patience and in service; to meet Christ your brother in every man, woman, and child, no matter who they be; and to greet that Christ with the open arms of love. To be a brother is also to live a life of joy and celebration, exemplified in the Daily Office and in the Holy Eucharist. It is, in fact, to live in such a way that life itself would have no reason if it were not for the presence of Christ's redeeming love.

Following this statement, Master of Ceremonies James Teets of Maryland called for candidate Thomas Burnham to come forward (virtually) to be received into the novitiate, together with his presenter, Director of Postulants and Novices Tobias Stanislas Haller of Maryland, who affirmed that the community's Council had approved his reception. The Minister General then asked Thomas the traditional questions regarding his desire to enter the novitiate and his willingness and promise to continue in his training, after which the Minister General gave him the new name Thomas Andrew and welcomed him in this new step in his life with the community.

The Master of Ceremonies then called for the two men to be admitted to the postulancy to speak up, together with their presenter, Director of Vocations Ronald Augustine Fox of Chicago. The Minister General asked the candidates — Carlos R Fernandez of Southeast Florida and Isaac Ruiz-Solá of Puerto Rico — to speak to their reason for being there: "It is my desire to become a

postulant in the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory.” And so it was accomplished, and the two men were added to the Brotherhood’s postulancy at that moment.



Another view of the Virtual Convocation

The Rites concluded with the Minister General’s prayer:

Almighty God, you have revealed your greatness and glory; for there is no god in heaven or on earth who can do such works as you have done: Fill us, we beseech you, with the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may do the work you have given us to do, to the praise and glory of your Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Bo Alexander officiated at Evening Prayer from that point, and the office concluded with thanks to all. During a break for dinner, Webmaster Richard Edward Helmer of California kept the Zoom meeting open for all who wished to converse during the dinner hour in a virtual “common room” until the whole community gathered for Compline at 8:00 PM, at which Nathanael Deward Rahm of Chicago officiated, assisted by Enoch John Valentine of Rhode Island.

At 10:00 AM (EDT) on Saturday July 18th, in consideration of the several different time zones across the US and the even greater gap for David John Battrick in New South Wales, Australia, virtual Morning Prayer began the day’s devotions, officiated by David Luke Henton of Rio Grande, assisted by Jason Peter Seta of Pennsylvania. Then followed a workshop on the theme of “Pastoral Care in the time of Pandemic,” responding to a United Methodist Church panel discussion video which the brothers had viewed previously. David Luke, the Brotherhood’s outgoing Director of Education, facilitated the panel discussion, joined by Tobias Stanislas, and Richard John Lorino of Central Florida. All three shared their experience in various forms of pastoral care, and the nation’s and the world’s involvement with COVID-19 and its effects

upon parishes and individual Christians, in particular the challenges people face as they try to live amid constant concern about this deadly virus. After the presentations, deep conversation continued until it was time for Noonday Prayer, officiated by Thomas Bushnell of New York with the assistance of Christopher Stephen Jenks of Rhode Island.

Following a break for lunch, the community assembled again for its annual Chapter meeting. Each of the officials of the community submitted detailed reports for the agenda, together with the Minister General's annual report and the opportunity for the Rt Rev Rodney R Michel, the Brotherhood's Episcopal Visitor, to reflect upon this two-day virtual gathering and to offer words of encouragement to all present. This convocation marked Bishop Rodney's 22nd year as Episcopal Visitor — we give thanks for his ongoing presence, thoughtful advice, and support.

In other business, Chapter adopted two amendments to the Constitution, together with one language correction. An update to the Customary brought that document into line with current practice. Chapter then elected its representative to the Education Committee for the Brother John Nidecker Continuing Education Fund — approving an additional term for Virgilio Fortuna of Massachusetts. Thus ended Chapter's business session for 2020.

After a brief break, Annual Convocation reconvened for the traditional Mission Service, suitably amended to reflect the reality that all were already scattered on the constrained mission and ministry allowed under the COVID regimens. The Minister General recommissioned each member by name for continued service to God's church, commending their ministries and their prayers with these words:

V: Servants of the servants of God, scattered abroad throughout the world, rejoice in the power of the Spirit.

R: Thanks be to God, to whom alone be glory.

Province 1

Christopher Stephen Jenks and William Francis Jones had a profitable online meeting with the bishop of Rhode Island and his canon to the ordinary on September 9th, during which they discussed possibilities for new ministry to the homeless in and around the city of Providence. Both of our brothers have many years of experience in related ministries, and the bishop was very helpful in suggesting areas that they might pursue. This is an exciting time for all concerned and we wish them every blessing as they undertake the background research so fundamental to such ministry development. Watch this space for more news in the future!

Province 3

During this time of quarantine and of distanced gatherings, the Church of the Advent in Baltimore's Federal Hill has been closed since the first Sunday in March, but effort has been made to try to maintain some sense of community during this difficult time. In his capacity as assisting priest there, Tobias



Stanislas Haller has participated by preaching at the Daily Office and celebrating the Holy Eucharist there, assisted by James Teets, as virtual liturgies are being explored. The pandemic struck this parish as it is working toward calling a new rector, and everyone there is happy to have Tobias Stanislas on hand to see them through this most difficult period.

☐ Tobias Stanislas made use of these months of enclosure to work on an icon of Blessed Absalom Jones (shown at left) for Saint Peter's Episcopal Church, Lewes DE. The icon will be installed later this year.

Province 4



The Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida and the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem have a solid companion diocese relationship. The current Archbishop of Jerusalem, the Most Rev Suheil Dawani, will retire in 2021 and Dean of Saint George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, the Very Rev Hosam Naoum has been elected and consecrated coadjutor. Dean Naoum visited Southeast Florida earlier this year and Angel Gabriel Roque had the opportunity to meet him at that time. They spoke at length about the religious life. At the consecration in June, Bishop of Southeast Florida Peter Eaton was one of the co-consecrating bishops. It is a wonderful witness to maintain a relationship with the Diocese of Jerusalem, the center of the Holy Land.

☐ An outreach program involving Mark Andrew Jones' parish Saint Nicholas featured in the August 21 issue of the Pompano Beach *New Pelican*, in a feature on "Charity in a time of COVID." The Brotherhood has been happy to support the "Holy Grill" through outreach grants over the years, and also pleased to see this work is being recognized for the good it does in these difficult times. As the article reports, the Grill has served over 42,000 meals.

Province 5

Ronald Augustine Fox has been awarded a certificate of completion for a course in liturgical theology from the Liturgical Institute of the University of Saint Mary of the Lake. The university is the principal seminary and school of theology for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago.



*Ronald Augustine Zooming
Morning Prayer*

□ Ronald Augustine and Joseph Basil Gauss worship at Church of the Atonement in Chicago, where Ronald Augustine is head Master of Ceremonies and liturgical coordinator, and Joseph Basil sings in the Saint Cecilia Choir and serves on the altar. During these uncertain times, Rector Erika Takacs began holding Morning Prayer on Facebook Live each day at 8:30 AM. She called on the two Gregorian friars to help, and between them they officiate at Morning Prayer on Sunday and Monday.

Reflections on Pastoral Care In the Time of Plague

Listening

Pastoral Care is a ministry of listening. *Active* listening is a skill which must be learned, since we are continually bombarded by distractions that interfere with our ability to listen. If we cannot listen well, we cannot hear. Active listening also includes “listening” to body language, posture, facial expression, and so on, all things that are best realized in personal, face-to-face interaction. Telephone and video interaction limits the amount of information that can be gleaned.

Pastoral Care is not about making people feel better or happy. It is about creating a relationship which helps a person discover what it is that is keeping them from feeling better or happy; and then “sitting in the boat” with them or rowing together as the person moves to another place. During a time like this, our time with people might be limited by many factors, including quarantine and social distancing.

Reaching out to congregants via technology helps them feel connected to their faith community, which has been especially important during this time. Live-streaming worship, weekly phone calls, and so on, all say, “We care.” Awareness of certain tech limitations among older congregants is important. The “older” generation is likely more comfortable on the phone than a video chat. Young people would rather text than talk. These are all considerations for offering care across the multi-generational spectrum.

Grieving is OK and appropriate. Most folks are grieving both the loss of their “normal” life as well as, in some cases, an actual loss of life of a friend, spouse, or loved one. We can help them know that it is OK to be sad or anxious during this time, and offer our support and availability if needed.

Anxiety and exhaustion were two things that kept popping up in some of the comments brothers made in reaction to the video from UMC. This is understandable: Anxiety is a normal reaction to uncertainty, so long as it does not interfere with our day-to-day living. Once we feel that anxiety is controlling us,

rather than us controlling *it*, we need to seek professional intervention. Exhaustion is best prevented by knowing our limits, allowing ourselves time to renew and refresh, and by engaging in activities completely unrelated to care-giving that can provide re-creation.

Gregory the Great was pontiff during the great plague that ravaged Rome in 590. In fact, he was elected pope to replace Pelagius II, who died from that plague outbreak. The people of those days did not understand how disease spread or how to take precautions the way we do today. In fact, Gregory's solution was to gather the community together for a penitential procession — the exact opposite of what we are doing today — to pray for God's intervention. (One historian reports that eighty people died during the procession!) As the story goes, Gregory experienced a vision of Saint Michael the Archangel during the procession, taking it as a message that the plague would end soon — and indeed it did. Gregory continually warned that this world was nearing its end, and this was not to be met with fear but with prayer, contrition and joyful expectation: a very different world-view and mindset from today!

A question came about our role as “mandatory reporters.” I think we all should be hyper-vigilant when someone talks about taking their own life, something that is very possible while people are quarantined and unable to participate in their normal activities. Sometimes we use the phrase, “I’ll kill myself,” ironically, never actually meaning we would harm ourselves. But when someone says it and means exactly that, we can’t let it pass by as if nothing was said. We need to dig deeper. Looks of horror, shock, a judgemental posture, biblical platitudes, or drama don’t help. Instead, the first strategy should be to calmly question whether the person actually has a plan. If there is a “plan” — whether they show you a stash of pills, or a gun, or a window — the next move is to inform them that for their safety and your own sense of well being, you must inform someone who can give them the help they need. Then make the appropriate call to either 911 or a suicide hotline.

It is important to let the person know that you are going to do this. We don’t need their permission, but we do need their trust if there is going to be any future relationship. If someone tells you something in a pastoral conversation, they expect it to be kept confidential, so calling authorities without letting them know first is a breach of ethical confidentiality.

In summary, whatever our pastoral position, formal or informal, we can all be considered mandatory reporters whenever this issue surfaces. If you are not sure whether it warrants professional intervention, bring it to the professionals anyway and let them sort it out. Better to err on the side of caution than live with the consequences.

We are on a whole new journey through uncharted waters. What was “normal” in many situations is no longer viable, so we are called to use our imaginations and our gifts to find new and effective ways of doing things, including how we care for ourselves and for one another. Closed gyms don’t mean our bodies should become weak. Closed churches don’t mean our souls

should become parched and dry. There are solutions and alternate ways waiting to be discovered. New wine needs new wineskins!

Some post-Convocation thoughts:

This virtual convocation did exactly what many have been trying to achieve in their parishes. It connected us to our loved community. It brought us “together” and made me feel almost as connected to each of you as I would feel in your actual presence.

The Zoom presentation reinforced my need for a live “audience.” This is likely what our priests have found as they celebrate and preach in an empty church to a virtual congregation. I found it difficult to gauge how people were reacting to the presentations. The slight lag in response time was grueling when one expected a laugh and it didn’t come — until seconds later.

The Mission Service was very moving. Hearing Richard Thomas say each of our names as if we were there, kneeling right in front of him, was powerful and connecting. I was acutely aware, however, of the lack of touch, not feeling the cross being signed on my forehead, or his hands on my head, and not being able to reverence his ring.

Several of us lingered after everything finished, not wanting to leave. There was obviously something that powerfully connected us that we did not want to end. I take this as proof that although I would not want it to be the norm, it did what I had hoped for and needed.

Rabbi Harold Kushner once made the observation that when you see a movie in a theater surrounded by other people, and then watch the same movie at home alone, it doesn’t seem as funny or scary or suspenseful. At home, it lacks the energy that exists in the air when we are surrounded by other people laughing or gasping or screaming. His point was about congregational worship. Our daily prayer is important, yet it is a solitary discipline which feels very different than prayer when we are physically together. I hope we can be creative in this area in the future.

I’ll end by recalling a Julian of Norwich quote — not from Julian herself, but from a play by James Janda, who imagined what Julian might have said:

The sorrowing, the sick, the unwanted, the lonely, both young and old, rich and poor, all come to my window. “No one listens,” they tell me, and so I listen and tell them what they have just told me. And I sit in silence, listening, letting them grieve. “Julian, you are wise,” they say, “You have been gifted with understanding.” All I did was listen. For I believe full surely that God’s spirit is in us all, giving light, wisdom, understanding, speaking words in us when we cannot speak, showing us gently what we would not see; what we are afraid to see; so that we may show pity, mercy, forgiveness to ourselves.

Thanks for this wonderful opportunity to share our experiences, and thanks for listening to my part of the presentation and for your valued comments and feedback. Much love to each of you.

Richard John Lorino



Spiritual life in these days

I want to comment on the pastoral role of praying the Daily Office in Christian community. At Saint John's in Alamogordo, where I'm doing my field placement, we began praying Morning, Noonday, and Evening Prayer together on weekdays early on in the pandemic, and it has flourished. We spend a good bit of time in conversation before and after the offices, and also in incorporating individual intentions into every office. It has been a wonderful opportunity for pastoral care and connection for a lot of our participants. And I see this at work both with our regular participants, for whom this has become a deeply connected, intimate Christian community that provides relief from loneliness, anxiety, alienation, and isolation day-in and day-out. But it is also a praying Christian community within the parish that people know about and that can provide immediate pastoral support to people in need. We find folks both within the parish and from outside who show up at the offices needing to talk, sometimes even in crisis, and our being available to listen and pray one-on-one with folks is a beautiful pastoral ministry that has grown out of the pandemic and our praying the Daily Office. As a worshipping community, there are ways that we can attend to and provide additional pastoral care in conjunction with some of our worship.

Here in the Diocese of the Rio Grande we have a weekly clergy meeting on Tuesday afternoon with the bishop and the canon to the ordinary, and it has the dual focus of information-sharing and pastoral care and support. Bishop Hunn always focuses on reminders about self-care, including maintaining or improving solitary spiritual practices (studying Scripture, maintaining Sabbath, praying — including the Daily Office — engaging in spiritual direction, regulating and moderating consumption of news), but also maintaining maximum mental health: monitoring one's own affect and any experiences of depression, anxiety, irritability, changes in sleep, diet, libido, substance use, and so on, and being proactive about seeking professional help. Almost every time we meet, he reminds the clergy of their mental health insurance plan coverage — the free visits they are allotted with a mental health professional — and the wisdom of being proactive in seeking therapy.

On another mental health note, I want to share how our conceptions of God may play into self-harm as both a risk and a resiliency factor, and what we can *all* do as brothers, regardless of our backgrounds, in helping lower the risk of self-harm and increase resiliency for people experiencing despondency: If your conception of God is one of wrath and judgement — and even within the Episcopal Church we have *lots* of folks with baggage about that from childhood, family of origin, past religious abuse, and trauma — it is very easy, in despair, to turn that wrath and judgement inward. That is a spiritual risk-factor for suicide and other self-destructive actions. Conversely, if your God-concept is one of absolute, unconditional love — a God whose unconditional love includes the beautiful and sacred soul of every human being *including* yourself — that is a spiritual resiliency-factor to counter self-harm. One thing every one

of us can do is teach, preach, and testify to the absolute, unconditional love of God in Christ Jesus. And that is a message we are called to share with every man, woman, and child.

Another of the things that Bishop Hunn began warning us about back in March is that we all would inevitably encounter irritability, anger, anxiety, and even a certain amount of “acting out” within the church in response to these extreme times and challenges. Church is different than work or home or the Rotary Club or the gym — those other places I may have to behave myself. But at church they have to put up with me! So you may, like me, have encountered a certain amount of that kind of “entitled outrage” within your congregations. Ordinarily sweet people may become reactive, disengaging from their past connections, or even responsibilities, in a congregation. They may not like to worship via Zoom, because they spend their work-week glued to a laptop, and have no interest in being with sisters and brothers on Sunday morning if it is not physically in the church. Being able to hear such complaints, without reacting as if one is the cause, remaining open to validate the feelings and listen carefully and deeply, can bring healing and at least some relief.

Meanwhile, I am fascinated by the differences in how people respond to connecting via Zoom. Those of you who know me well know my absolute aversion to talking on the telephone. I spent thirty years professionally as a social worker, and most of that time on the telephone, including lots of time after hours. Before we had caller I.D. I never knew if the incoming call was a potential suicide or a telemarketer, and I never had the choice of not answering. Now in retirement, I avoid talking on the telephone whenever and however I can. But to my absolute amazement I have fallen in love with Zoom! It has been a wonderful godsend and lifeline. And though I miss much about our sacramental and congregational life together — the sacraments, the peace, the singing, the hugs, the coffee hour — I love worshipping with and having fellowship with my sisters and brothers on Zoom, whether in an intimate gathering like the Daily Office, or a more formal gathering like our Sunday Eucharist, or in the incredible blessing of our Gregorian Happy Hour every Friday night.

However, I know I don’t speak for everyone: there are at least two dear brothers whom I look for every Friday night, and neither is almost ever on Zoom. I think they may hate Zoom as much as I hate the telephone! So I get that Zoom is not for everyone. And I suppose one of my questions would be for those folks who might dislike Zoom as much as I dislike the telephone: how could it be made more palatable, or *could* it be made more palatable? This is a question for us all as the pandemic continues, and the need for pastoral care with it.

David Luke Henton



Present and Accounted For

One of the key elements of the ministry of pastoral care is *presence*: being present to and with the one to whom one relates as a pastor. So the greatest challenge in this time of pandemic — and concomitant social distancing and isolation — is the inability of the pastor to be in the physical presence of those with whom the ministry of pastoral care is exercised.

I take as my text in response to this the words from First Corinthians 15: “If there is a physical body there is also a spiritual body.” Paul is, of course, talking about the resurrection; but this also applies to our present circumstances. If there is a physical presence there is also a spiritual presence — and this should not be a surprise to those of us who believe the promise that where two or three are gathered together in God’s name, God is present with them; and who trust and believe in the presence of God in, with, and under the physical forms of bread and wine.

Of course everyone knows the difference between sitting next to a person in flesh and blood and looking at their image on a computer monitor. But I would like to draw on another element of our tradition in response to that distinction: the tradition of the *icon*. It is part of that tradition to believe that in venerating an icon — an image of a saint or of Jesus Christ (the Incarnate One, the perfect image of God in human flesh) — the believer enters into their real presence, as if through a window into heaven. The icon is, it goes without saying, an image — and the faithful contemplation of that image requires imagination — *image*-ination). This imagination is a work of empathy and sympathy, of feeling *with* and feeling *for* — of allowing one’s mind, one’s imagination, to expand one’s spiritual presence to be with the other.

This is not as exotic as it sounds. One of the reasons using a mobile phone while driving (or even walking!) — even with headphones or ear-buds, or with the phone mounted on a holder — is so dangerous, is that in conversation over the phone one’s mind wanders to be in the presence of the other person, mentally away from where one is physically to where one is mentally, in the world of imagination. What I’m suggesting is that this can happen in a good way, a spiritual way, when we are engaged with another in an act of pastoral care via Zoom or some other application — or even on the phone.

In addition to Saint Gregory, two other saints, two Francis’s, offer some insight. You may be familiar with how Saint Clare visited Saint Francis of Assisi in a vision while fifty miles away — this is why she is the patron saint of television! Saint Francis was also a leader in two “virtual” liturgical innovations that placed the worshipers in a distant time and place: the Christmas Crèche and the Stations of the Cross. Perhaps more relevant to us as a community and to pastoral care at a distance is Saint Francis de Sales. He contributed to the foundation of the Sisters of the Visitation, without which we would not be here, as it was through their presence in Riverdale that our founder formed and shaped his vocation — which in the fulness of time became *our* vocation. Saint Francis de Sales was renowned as a pastoral care-giver, but did most of his

pastoral guidance and spiritual direction at a distance, by means of his own era's primary communication technology: paper and pen and ink. One can read his letters still, and put one's mind back to the 17th century, and receive spiritual guidance from one long dead — through the power of imagination.

Imagination is also key to another strand of our tradition that relates to pastoral care and spiritual guidance: the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola. The technique Saint Ignatius commended is a form of spiritual imagination, in which one places oneself into the biblical scene as vividly imagined as possible. For example, in our readings for Morning Prayer this week, we can imagine ourselves walking in silence with the children of Israel around that mighty but doomed city Jericho, hearing nothing but the sounds of our own footsteps in the sand, multiplied by thousands, and the harsh and frightening blaring of the ram's-horn trumpets, aware of the awesome presence of the Holy One in the ark leading our procession; catching on the air, through the stirred-up dust, the bitter scent of fear wafting down over the walls that will soon come tumbling down. Can't you feel yourself there?

And so my brothers I urge you to use your imagination in your pastoral ministry, to use the tools provided to make your presence felt and to feel the presence of those with whom you minister, as best you can. We are in the midst of a fast — a fast from our usual tools of ministry, a fast from being able to gather in our churches as congregations. But let us not forget that the church is the church when it is scattered as much as it is the church when it is gathered — indeed, as the deacon remindd us at the end of the Holy Eucharist, this is when we go forth to get about the work we are called and empowered to do, loving and serving God and our neighbor.

This is a time of fasting, but let us always recall that what counts in a fast is not what you give up but what you take on. Take on the work of imagination, and let it empower your ministry of service and pastoral care.

Tobias Stanislas Haller

A Reflection for the Quiet Days of Advent

Advent Longing

*Delivered at The Bishop's Ranch, Healdsburg, California,
December 10th, 2019*

Well over forty years of life, nearly twenty years of marriage, seventeen years of pastoral ministry, sixteen years of parenthood, and ten years in religious community have led me to an inescapable conclusion: for all our efforts at pure reason, we remain fundamentally emotional creatures. Most days are marked by our basic emotional states, whether anger or fear, feeling bad or sad or glad. We have words to describe these emotions, and we spend a lot of time choosing the words to describe them to ourselves or others, or just burying them deep down so we can get on with the day. But beneath these manifesting emotions lies an even deeper, more basic driving truth.

Our innermost life is organized around *desire* — not reasoned thought. However ordered or disordered we may judge this fact, however much we may attempt to rationalize our most basic motivations, this seems as true to me now as the sun rising in the morning or the waxing and waning of the moon.

Our lives are needful events in the cosmos. How much of our time is spent managing our most basic desires and needs like hunger and sleep, like recognition and love, or planning to meet these needs for ourselves or others? In our society, whole careers are sustained on pursuing the financial resources to survive, to fund the best for our families, to keep the roof over our heads and the food on our tables, to sustain essential safety and security that keeps the peace at home and abroad. And then a whole other set of human behaviors is rooted in that fundamental desire to be seen, to be important, to be loved, to be understood, to be held without condition, to be healed of all that hurts.

And what other desires could be more important than that? Our inner moral compass is not built of some sort of rational structure driven by empirical evidence and paths of carefully wrought logic, but by the basic motivations of looking out for the best for ourselves, our families, and our communities. Politicians and demagogues know just as well as marketers and con-artists how to exploit this basic truth about us for good and for ill.

We only judge when that compass points too much at our own selfish ambitions turning to greed, or we flail when we feel we are bleeding out carelessly for the insatiable desires of others. We gather for mutual support around twelve steps or call it a come-to-Jesus meeting when these essential desires get misdirected into the destructive throes of addiction, or when we ourselves enable the addiction of others.

Yet the fact remains unmoved: we are fundamentally emotional, desire-driven creatures.

And then there is God.

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I remember as a child, about this time of year, engaging in a most assiduous negotiation with God about what I should do and shouldn't do to deserve the Christmas gift I so desperately wanted to appear underneath the tree. Some years it worked, and some years it didn't, but I could never quite tell if God was just being arbitrary or if I had gotten it right or if I had messed up my end of the deal somehow. My quest was to reason my way to having some control over my own desires, and that most primitive assumption of our spiritual ancestors: that there is a way to play the game of life to get God or the gods to do what we want; a way to get the divine to meet our most basic desires.

Experience teaches us, of course, that our God is not subject to the whims of our desires. So the first step of the journey for me was to begin to comprehend that my desires might not matter as much to others — let alone God — as they did to me. Being more than somewhat impetuous, that led me to jump too often to the incorrect, heartbreaking conclusion that God probably didn't care about what I wanted or needed, and nor did other people. So why should I?

But that was only the beginning of this long spiritual journey. Because desire persists in all its forms. And like all adolescents, my desires for things graduated soon to desires for relationship, for sensuality, for love, and then, like all young adults, graduated again to desires for success and recognition, for a sense of purpose and some power in an unpredictable world.

And here I am again in Advent as an adult, a bit older, some might think wiser (I wonder!), for sure bearing considerably more responsibility and the discipline of that most reliable teacher — experience — looking at the desires of my life and for the first time learning to withhold judgment about what is ordered and disordered, what is reasonable and unreasonable: learning to reflect on Advent not with cool reason, but with the recognition of something I have known deep in my gut the whole time.

Advent is about our emotional roots, springing new shoots like the stump of Jesse — that old stump that once was confused around desiring power and control and esteem springing a new shoot that has something else entirely to do with desiring compassion and true justice and an unimaginable peace and finding again that rare, beautiful, astonishing desire: wonder. Advent is about God addressing both my inchoate and well-traveled desires, and the desires of not just my heart, but of the heart of the whole human family, and, indeed, of all creation.

Advent is about this renewal of our longing.

And not just renewing some “holy” longing reified and pure — like what we were taught for centuries by a judgmental magisterium on what “virgin” really means — but understanding anew our longing for things like our next meal, like rest, like our ever-pressing thirst, like our desire for companionship, like our ever-gnawing need to be seen, recognized, and loved, and that incessant desire for an ease to our pain, our suffering, our unresolved life-long riddles of being; and how all of these desires, embodied, unrelenting, gather like broken shards mended into a beautiful vessel of new longing we call hope.

Mary, I suppose, longed for a quiet life even after Gabriel visited with news that made less sense than half a dream. I suppose she longed, like most expectant mothers, for the unexpected foods, with odd hungers that often haunt pregnancy. I suppose she longed for rest from morning sickness and, later, from ever-deepening uncomfortable nights as the baby grew inside her womb. I suppose she longed, too, for genuine understanding from her bewildered husband-to-be and from family and neighbors who, no doubt, whispered in the quiet dark about this odd scandal conceived in their midst. I suppose she longed in her heart of hearts that birth to her firstborn would mean the end of a long, uncertain journey, when — of course — as with all parents, it would prove to be only the messy beginning of a meandering life of dead ends, strange misadventures, and unremitting heartache. Longing would be a thread from the angel’s annunciation to the foot of the cross, and beyond. And only in that experience beyond death we call resurrection, that life of longing would finally be understood as holy.

What do we long for as we sit here with Mary again? What do you long for? An end to this reflection? A bathroom break? Relief for an achy back or feet? Relief for a loved one at home or nearby? Comfort for a sore memory or balm for a fresh wound? Rest for that weariness we all carry? A break from that relentless truth where our longings are left unmet, a reprieve from that desire for comfort that exceeds our means or even the means of the whole world?

This season is about God being born in the midst of our most primitive longings, the divine touch coming into the most needful, visceral parts of our lives. It's about the conception brought about by the Spirit in the wombs of our unmet desires, our unsatiated needs, our most shameful passions. God knows we are emotional creatures built on desire, and Advent — perhaps most miraculously of all — tells us that God does not recoil from our most basic desires. God does not retreat from our essential longings to the lofty heights of reason or send fire and brimstone into whatever we deem shameful or disordered.

No, God does not judge our desires, our longings, but knocks at the doors of our hearts, seeking access to be born. God conceives to meet and dwell in those deep places where we cannot even begin to name our desires, in those empty places reason cannot fathom, in those depths where our desires well up from the dangerous unknowns of our strange souls, and everything we thought relegated to privacy is suddenly and terrifyingly exposed and known.

That's why Advent longing is so dangerous to us, and to the world of earthly power, with all of its engines of supposed cold, calculated reason. It's probably a good reason why there is an easy rush from Thanksgiving (or is it Hallowe'en now?) to Christmas, and why we would often rather find comfort in a neatly arranged shopping mall rather than the unkempt aisles of our hearts and closest relationships; and why so many of us this time of year struggle mightily with the edge of our own unmet desires and unhealed wounds.

Because it is only in our longings, met and unmet, familiar and strange, dignified or not, that the divine touch can truly begin the work of our salvation. It is only in the heart of our deepest longings that grace can truly be conceived and birthed. It is only there that the truth of who we are and who God is can be fully and undeniably disclosed. It is only there that a true and loving God can truly take charge of our longing wills and begin to grant us the unshakeable hope for true freedom and lasting, just peace and boundless wonder that underscores and ties together our deepest desires.

We are, God reminds us again, emotional creatures constructed of desire. There is no getting around it. After all, it is how we were fashioned in the deep places of the cosmos before the morning stars sang their praises or the first dawn appeared in the eastern sky.

And it is in our deepest longings that God conceives in us anew, children born of the Spirit, partners for a new creation, a people made of hope.

Richard Edward Helmer

