



Advent 2017

Saints Alive!

MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL



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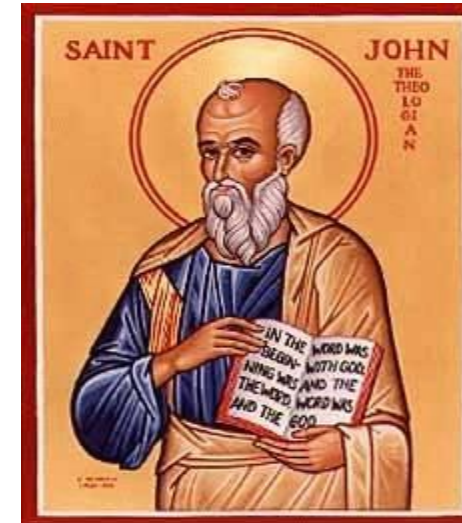
SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Note to all churches: you have my permission to make as many copies of this work as you would like. I ask only that you request from your members a thank offering (if Presbyterian-Calvinist) or free-will offering (if Methodist-Armenian). Collect the donations and send one check to your local judicatory (presbytery, conference, diocese, synod, etc.) to be shared with mission partners; write “mission partners” on the memo line. Failure to do so will lead to serious, spiritual consequences! (But no legal action will be taken, so, really, this is a litmus test for your conscience.)

Note to all readers: Responsibility for any flaws in this work are mine and mine alone. However, any credit due should be directed to Dr. Dale Bruner, whose outstanding commentary, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI), 2012, is the source of all quotations from famous Christian theologians, with footnotes embedded in the text referring to this work. Really, I’m not lying here – 100% of the quotes come from Dr. Bruner. (Okay, the Augustine quote on page 9 is well-known enough that even I know it, but everything else!) Thank you, Dale, for your winsome and gentle wisdom.

Note about this devotional: This Advent devotional is a bit different from others you may have read, for it focuses not merely on the nearness of Jesus’ birth but on the fullness of his life. Here you will immerse into stories well beyond the typical Advent devotional, for you will encounter Jesus from beginning to end: from “In the beginning” to “Peter, do you love me?” Moreover, the focus throughout is on the stories, especially the stories of personal encounter between Jesus and those who were blessed to encounter Jesus in the first-century.

However, if all that happens is we observe how *others* encountered Jesus in the first century, I will have failed as an author, for the invitation of the Gospel is to encounter Jesus today, in the here and now. The invitation of the Gospel is to hear of Jesus then encounter him, to allow the One who dwelled with Israel in the first century to dwell with us still. To accomplish this work of “there and then” as well as “here and now,” each day’s devotion has four parts: on the left side of each page is a listing of Gospel text and a reflection upon the passage, while on the right side of each page is a prayer patterned after “The Prayer of St. Francis,” and spiritual direction for the day. I pray that you find the pattern easy to use, life-giving, and a bit uncomfortable 😊



Author’s note regarding language: It is customary and appropriate to use inclusive language whenever possible. In every circumstance of human reference, I have observed this practice personally but allowed historical quotations to remain in their original form. It is also customary, though not universally agreed upon, to use inclusive language when referring to God as a means both of respect to those who find that such language distracts from connecting with the Gospel text, as well as to express the truth that God is Spirit and Scripture embraces both male and female metaphors for the Divine.

In this devotional, I have chosen to use inclusive language in reference to God as a general rule but not exclusive practice. The intimacy of God’s relationship to Jesus is expressed in John’s Gospel as “Father-Son.” I have chosen to continue this practice in places, even as I affirm God is Spirit, neither “male” nor “female.” I regret some readers will find my occasional usage of Father to refer to God as distracting; please accept my apologies in advance.

WBM

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 1, Monday – John 1:1-5, 14-18

Virtually all English translations of John begin, "In the beginning was the Word." However, in Spanish John 1:1 reads, "En el principio fue el Verbo." For those who do not understand Spanish, the surprise is that the word in Spanish for "word" is *palabra*; the word *verbo* translates as our English "verb." While linguistically surprising, perhaps, this Spanish translation of John 1:1 is theologically inspired – In the beginning was the Verb: an action, an act of the dynamic God whose name can translate as, "I will be who I will be."

John's Gospel is a bit different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Even more so than the other Gospels, John likes to describe individual encounters with Jesus and how individuals are changed by the encounter. These personal encounters are always dynamic, active and interactive; they are verb. What was true for the individuals who lived in Jesus' day is also true for we who live today: One cannot encounter Jesus personally and stay the same. Jesus, the Living Verb, is seeking you and me.

What will *you* do when you encounter *him*? How will *you* be transformed?

John's Gospel is flush with symbols; indeed, one misses much in the Gospel by an over-literal reading of the text. We see such symbolism here in chapter 1, in which we hear echoes of both Genesis and Exodus. "In the beginning..." reminding us of the Creation, and "dwelled among us..." reminding us of the Exodus in which God's glory dwelled with the Israelites in the Tent that accompanied them in the desert. Yet John draws us beyond Genesis by suggesting the Creation was called into existence by "the Verb who was with God and who was God," and moves us beyond Exodus by making the amazing assertion that God's dwelling among us was found in "the Verb made flesh." Simply put: John is saying that in Jesus we discover the New Creation and are invited to journey with him on a New Exodus.

This New Creation and New Exodus are a journey of personal encounter. As Hoskyns writes, "The words of Jesus are not isolated maxims, detached aphorisms, or disjointed commands..." (14) Rather they are living encounter with the One who enters our spiritual lives as Verb. What will you do when you encounter *him*? How will *you* be transformed?

A Prayer to the Verb Made Flesh

O Verb made flesh, make me an instrument of your Story,
where others know not its vocabulary, may I teach them to call their Abba and Imma by name,
where others know not its grammar, may I show them your guidance is for our blessing,
where others know not its plot, may I tease with a joyous spoiler alert,
where others fear it is a horror tale, may I assure them it is a love story,
where others seek a book of recipes, may I point them to an adventure tale,
where others settle for stilted prose, may I share with them soaring poetry.
O Living Verb, may I not so much seek to write my own story as to tell your Story,
to re-write the narrative as to allow it to challenge my assumptions,
to reduce the Story to slogans as to immerse myself in its intricacies.
For it is in encountering Divine Action that New Creation becomes,
it is in encountering Sacred Journey that New Exodus launches,
it is in encountering the Verb made flesh
that I am embraced by a love that leads to eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice your response to reading Scripture and committing yourself to prayer. If you resist the Spirit while encountering Jesus in these pages, if something deep within you rebels, please be forgiving, accepting and gentle with yourself. It's okay! Acknowledge the resistance, exhale slowly, pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," and persevere. If you do not feel any resistance throughout this month, consider yourself a most blessed saint! Acknowledge the gift, exhale slowly, pray, "Thank you, Jesus," and persevere. Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 1, Tuesday – John 1:19-35

Let's admit it: John was terse with those who came to inquire of him. All they wanted to know was if he was the Messiah or Elijah (Malachi 4:5-6) or the prophet Moses had promised (Deuteronomy 18:15). The leadership wondered if John was one of these promised ones from God. Yet John's responses grew ever more surly: "I am not the Messiah," "I am not." "No!"

John's encounter with Jesus, as described in John's Gospel, is peculiar. It is brief, almost fleeting. It appears John was uncertain his cousin, Jesus, was the One whom God had called to be Messiah. Yet John, immersed in the Word, knew Messiah would be the One upon whom the Spirit descended, for the Lord had instructed him through the prophet Isaiah:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse... *The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him* — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord... (11:1-2)

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.... (61:1)

And John knew, again from Isaiah, that this Dove would also be a Lamb:

Upon *him* was punishment that made *us* whole...was led like a lamb to slaughter. (53:4-7)

In Jesus, John saw the Lamb and the Dove, and they were one: The Lamb who takes away what holds us back from living as God's children, our sin, and the Dove who brings us what we need to live fully as God's people, the Spirit. Jesus is both Forgiver and Spirit-Giver; in Jesus we are both made to be naked and come to be fully clothed; in Jesus we find our full healing that we may live fully whole.

To be a servant of this Lamb who is also Dove was always and only John's highest honor. He was not the Christ. He was not Elijah. He was not the Prophet. He gladly relinquished all claim to these titles! He was but a Voice; such was his life's true calling. And, John knew, he must decrease that Jesus may increase. As it was for John, may it be for you and me.

A Prayer of St. John the Baptizer

Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, make me an instrument of decreasing,
where others inhabit bully pulpits, help me speak softly (and not carry a big stick),
where others fight and fuss to be always and forever right, help me see when I am in the wrong,

where others crave adulation, help me be content in you,

where others insist, may I seek to invite,

where others berate, may I seek to bless,

where others seize, may I seek to share.

O Dove of God, may I not so much seek

to grow in stature as to increase in service,

to expand my power base as to extend your love's reach,

to rise in status as to lift the name of the Savior.

For it is in Jesus, the Lamb of God, that sin is taken from me,

it is in Jesus, the Dove of God, that Spirit is given to me,

it is in Jesus' descent into death that I may ascend unto eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice your own neediness in interactions with others. Do you feel the *need* to be right or to be seen as being right? Do you feel the *need* to be the smartest, strongest, funniest, most helpful, most insightful, hardest working, etc., etc.? Wanting to be any of these things is natural; *needing* to be even one of them is a symptom one's identity is not sufficiently rooted and grounded in Jesus' grace, mercy, and love. Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 1, Wednesday – John 2:1-11

Today I ask you to indulge your sacred imagination. Imagine your name is Joab. You, Joab, are the Master of the Banquet. The wedding is in Cana of Galilee. The people in Galilee tend to be poorer, rougher, less educated, and less sophisticated than in Jerusalem. Though you are dealing with a “down home” crowd, you are not worried for this is not your first wedding. In fact, you are so confident in your own abilities that you cannot even imagine *anything* going wrong. After all, you are Joab, the Master!

And then CATASTROPHE strikes.

The wine has run out. For a wedding feast intended to last up to a week, with the entire community invited, with people even from other towns present, running low on wine is not only social humiliation, it is theological catastrophe, for wine is symbol of the Torah. Torah, about which it was said even the Lord studies it three hours a day. The Torah, path of purity for all people. That is what all the rabbis teach! Without Torah, all hope is lost.

Or is it?

Enter one of the out-of-town guests. His hands are rough, like a carpenter's hands. His mother whispers in his ear. He does not look happy, but his raised eyebrows, slight tilt of the head, and deep sigh tell the tale – he will do as she asks. “Fill the ceremonial jugs, the ones used for the people's purification,” he commands, as if the wedding has a new Master. When the servants look at you for instruction, you nod, giving your assent. The jugs are filled to the brim. And from the water comes wine, as if ordinary life becomes LIFE! at the voice of his command.

As if his voice is a New Torah.

You, Joab, do not much care how he did it. You only rejoice. You only know that catastrophe has been averted, humiliation reversed. And perhaps, you ponder, a new path to purity found. “Yes,” you wonder at the wonder of it all, “there is a new Master of the Banquet.”

His name is Jesus.

A Prayer of Wedding Celebration

King of kings and Lord of lords, make me an instrument of your praise,

where there is silence, let me contemplate your goodness,

where there is singing, let me raise my voice to your grace,

where there is rejoicing, let me join it,

where there is awe and wonder, let me embrace it,

where there are harps and trumpets, let me play them,

where there are choirs of angels,

let me unite with them in their songs of adoration.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

my own glory but to give you all glory,

to tell of what I can do, as to speak always of your mighty works,

to stand on my own two legs, as to bend the knee.

For it is in emptying myself that I find your fullness,

it is in letting go of life that you reveal to me LIFE!,

it is in confessing Jesus Christ as Lord that glory comes to you, O God.

Go into the world... Notice God's wonders all around. Notice at least three moments of grace in your day. Tell a friend, child, parent, spouse, or partner about these moments of grace, and then thank God for them tonight in prayer. Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 1, Thursday – John 3:1-17

Nicodemus, a member of the ruling party, called the Sanhedrin, was part of the cadre of teachers who oversaw the Temple. His was a position of power and authority, of command and control. It is not surprising, then, that Nicodemus was completely fixated on what he thought human beings could or could not do, on what they could or could not have done to them – in short, on human possibilities.

But Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about the *ruach*, which is the Hebrew word for Breath and Wind and Spirit. He told him new birth comes not from our mother's womb but from God's Spirit. "The *ruach* blows where it will," he said.

Martin Luther wrote, "Jesus' words do not concern what you must do or not do but concern what you must become...not a different life but a different birth." (172) Rudolf Bultmann wrote, "Rebirth means something more than an improvement in one's person; it means that one receives a new *origin*...." (ibid.) The Spirit of God - the *ruach* - is the powerful force that gifts such new origin to us.

And let us be clear: the *ruach* of God is not some impersonal force; there is no mere energy field of the universe. God's Spirit flows from God's person, from God's Divine Self: sent and directed, purposeful and personal, and, yes, life-giving, new birth.

What Jesus told Nicodemus about receiving this life was odd, and hidden to English readers. Nicodemus was not merely to believe Jesus, nor even to believe in Jesus. In the Greek of the New Testament, the unique way Jesus described faith was to believe *into* him: like jumping into a running stream or falling into a lover's arms, or like entrusting all that we are and all that we will become into Jesus' hands.

We learn later in the Gospel that Nicodemus believed into Jesus. For this Jesus, his Lord, showed him that night the heart of God and so birthed for him a new heart, a new mind, a new life, a new origin. Entrusting my life into his grace, entrusting my heart into his mercy, entrusting my well-being into his peace, I am blown by the *ruach*, and I will believe into Jesus.

A Prayer of Nicodemus

Lord of New Life, make me an instrument of second birth,

where there is awe, let me show wonder,

where there is ambiguity, let me explore possibility,

where there is mystery, let me seek your majesty,

where there is stillness, let me yearn for the Wind,

where there is lifelessness, let me pray for your Breath,

where there is deadness, let me open to your Spirit.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to give birth to myself as to accept my need to be born anew,

to answer a question as to ask it in the first place,

to know all things as to be known by you.

For it is in seeking that we are found,

it is in asking that we are answered,

it is in knocking that the door to eternal life

is opened to us by Jesus, our Savior.

Go into the world... Notice the "Spirit nudges" you experience throughout the day: to speak or to listen, to lift up or to let go, to take action or to refrain. To whom is God sending you to be a blessing? To friend or family? To neighbor or stranger? To colleague or enemy? Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 1, Friday – John 4:1-26

We do not know the name of the Samaritan Woman at the Well, but Roman Catholic tradition later gave her the nickname, St. Photina, the Luminous One. (277) While it is doubtful her actual name was Photina, what is clear is that her conversation with Jesus transformed her, made her luminous indeed. Photina, a wounded bird, the ultimate outsider, reviled by Jews because she was a Samaritan, scorned by men because she was a woman, perhaps isolated by other women as she went to the well at midday not the morning (this is hotly debated by scholars), was transformed into the ultimate insider - the *prima apostola*, the first apostle.

All because *Jesus* was thirsty.

Jesus was thirsty, Photina was at the well, and, naturally, a conversation ensued. Jesus is quite the conversationalist! Jesus saw beyond Photina's ornery exterior to the thirsty soul beneath and offered Living Water, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Of Jesus' promise that those who drink of this water would be "never thirsty," John Calvin said: Jesus "does not mean that we drink so that we are fully satisfied from the very first day, but only that the Holy Spirit is a constantly flowing well." (256) The gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of God's presence, personally experienced, always and forever.

And how does one receive this gift of Living Water?

It is too simple, too breathtakingly simple. All one must do is ask for it. Ask! You cannot pay for it, for Living Water is free, a gift. Ask! You cannot earn it, for the gift of Living Water is...well, a gift. Ask! You cannot beg or beseech, entreat or implore Jesus to give you this gift because he has already offered it to you, and no such special intensity is required to receive the gift. Ask! There is no deeper calling nor mysterious meaning, no conquering of sin nor creating the way for others' salvation. Ask! As simple as that.

In the Gospels, asking is belief exhaling. We inhale trust in Jesus; we exhale asking in the simplest, freest manner possible: "Please, may it be to me as you have said."

A Prayer of St. Photina

Lord of Living Water, make me an instrument of renewal,
where there are parched lips, let me give the cup of cold water,
where there is a parched soul, let me offer the cup of salvation,
where there is dryness of heart, let me worship in Spirit,
where there is an arid mind, let me worship in truth,
where others need to hear good news, let me point to the Way
where others walk through the desert, let me show them the well.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to sate my own hunger as to feast on your Word,
to quench my own thirst as to drink from your Spirit,
to lament my own "what is" as to be ready for your "what can be."

For it is in being found by Jesus that we are made new,
it is in being loved by the Christ that we are made whole,
it is in sharing Christ Jesus with others that they may discover the path to eternal life.

Go into the world... What helps you unlock your heart to *receive blessing* from God, others, and the creation? Do you drink deeply from the well-spring of God's grace? Notice those moments when you receive – or resist – grace today. Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 1, Saturday – John 4:46-54

A Roman Centurion was a powerful figure in ancient times. Commanding others and yet himself commanded, a certain Centurion, let's call him Gaius, lived between the worlds of authority and obedience. Gaius understood how to get things done, except the one thing he desperately wanted to do – save his son's life.

Having heard reports of Jesus' power, Gaius went to him seeking favor. He was respectful, as was appropriate when seeking favor, and, he thought, gracious in speaking kindly to a Jew whom he considered his inferior both in race and rank. "Sir, come down to Capernaum for my son is dying." He was taken aback when Jesus rebuked him. Did Jesus not know who he was, an official of Caesar himself? Did Jesus not understand Gaius held the power of life and death?

Too afraid to be offended, Gaius pleaded, "Sir, *please* come down to Capernaum before my little boy dies!" And then he saw the look Jesus gave him, saw Jesus' eyes, and began to understand that it was not he who held the power of life and death. Not even Caesar held such power, but this Jesus seemed to hold it and to wield it according to his God's desire, for Jesus responded, "You may go home now, your son is *zoe*, alive."

There are two words in the Greek language for life: *bios* from which we get our word "biology" and which refers to physical life, and *zoe* for which we do not have an English referent but which refers to spiritual life, soul life, one's truest self. Jesus spoke to Gaius beyond the limits of *bios* to the promise of *zoe*.

Among Romans it was said of Caesar that he was God's Divine Son; even their coins had Caesar's image and the phrase *Divi Filius* - Son of God - upon them. But Gaius no longer believed this to be true. He finally understood there was a ruler beyond Caesar. And it was the most unlikely suspect: a poor man from peasant birth; an uneducated man, at least by human standards; a Jew of all people! Yet one whom he now saw was the true Son of God. Gaius may have pledged his service to Caesar, but he could no longer pledge his soul. There is only One to whom that honor is due.

A Prayer of Gaius

Lord of *Zoe*, make me an instrument of your renewing life,
where there is pride, let me sow empathy,
where there is ego, let me invite community,
where there is hubris, let me show the folly of such a life,
where others are blinded by this world, let me gently rebuke,
where others cannot hear whispers of justice, let me gently invite,
where others fail you, let me forgive them.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to live a life of command and control as to discover the wonder of your ways,
to be full of myself as to be guided by your Spirit,
to elevate my own interests as to consider the interests of others.
For it is in emptying ourselves that we are filled,
it is in humbling ourselves that we are exalted,
it is in dying to Christ that we are raised to eternal *zoe*, in Him.

Go into the world... Notice today those moments when you put your own interests above the interests of others. How frequently do you see the world primarily from your own perspective, elevating Self above all? How often do you try to control even God? Is it difficult for you to "Let Go and Let God"? Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 2, Monday – John 5:1-16

The church that day was called the House of Grace, which is what *Bethesda* means in Hebrew. The congregation that day, we are told in verse three, consisted of “the blind, the lame, the paralyzed.” Even in our socially conscious society, these are folks underserved; in ancient times such folks were forgotten, excluded, a burden.

One such forgotten man had been paralyzed for 38 years. Let’s call him Micaiah. Commentators note Micaiah seems particularly ornery or dull or both. He whined that others wouldn’t help him and hardly seemed to want to help himself. Even when Jesus asked Micaiah directly, “Do you want to get well?” Micaiah complained about the young whipper-snappers who beat him to the healing waters of Bethesda. Even still, Jesus commanded him to arise.

The command we read in our Bibles is “get up,” but the word Jesus spoke was *egeiro*. Paul, wrote using this word *egeiro*,

We have testified about God that he raised (*egeiro*) Christ from the dead. But he did not *egeiro* him if in fact the dead are not *egeiro*." (1 Corinthians 15:15)

So...with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is *egeiro* imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is *egeiro* in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is *egeiro* in power; it is sown a natural body, it is *egeiro* a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:42-44)

Jesus wanted Micaiah to walk, yes, but wanted for him so much more! Jesus wanted for Micaiah to soar on wings like eagles, to walk and not be faint. Jesus wanted for him to carry his mat, yes, but wanted for him also to carry compassion in his heart, to carry the burdens of others, to carry *Jesus’* love for the least of these, *his* brothers and *his* sisters. Arise, indeed!

Jesus offers to you this day the promise of *egeiro*. Do you want to be well in this way? Do you desire to do more than walk? Jesus’ promise is to live life anew – how will you lean into new ways of seeing the world? Jesus’ promise is life abundant – what will you share of God’s goodness to others? Jesus’ promise is to life eternal – how will you begin *now* to live into the *always* that is our common inheritance? Arise, my friends, arise, for Jesus himself is risen! Alleluia!

A Prayer of Micaiah

Lord of Wholeness, make me an instrument of your sacred touch,

where there is illness, let me bring healing,

where there is weakness, let me bring strength,

where there is aloneness, let me bring presence,

where there is brokenness, let me bring reconciliation,

where there is fear, let me bring peace,

where hearts are anxious, let me show them you.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to complain as to understand,

to avoid as to empathize,

to turn away as to journey with.

For it is from care that compassion is borne,

it is from compassion that community is given birth,

it is in community that is born anew

the gift of communion with Jesus that leads to eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice those who are different from you in some way. Notice within you the ways you *feel* or *seem* different from others. Notice self and others, and be gentle. Allow others, and allow yourself, to live in the House of Grace. Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 2, Tuesday – John 6:25-44

People grumble. Complain. Gripe. Grouse. Protest. My personal favorite is “murmur,” which is how some translations describe the Israelites in the desert; murmuring against Moses and Aaron because life in the desert was hard. Moses, of course, responded to the people’s murmuring with some murmuring of his own, until finally God rained manna down from heaven.

People like it when they believe God gives them stuff. What was true of the ancient Israelites, and is true of modern prosperity gospel adherents, is no less true for you and me. After all, no one prays, “Lord, I don’t really care if you get around to this or not, but, yeah, I have this tumor I need some help with if you’re not too busy.”

The spiritual dilemma for both ancient and modern folk is that what God really wants to give is God’s own person. Jesus, who claimed to be greater than Moses, politely refused to grant the people’s request for a new miracle; specifically, to provide more manna. Instead Jesus offered himself, “I am the Bread of Life.”

The people were offended that Jesus did not offer more: more manna, more miracles. And he claims to be greater than Moses? Hah! Bruner cautions us against such “moreism” in our own faith. (397) The wanting of God for transactional purposes, for the good we can get, for the ways our faith can use, cajole, and manipulate the Sacred toward conforming to our will, leads to a spirituality of murmuring. And such is the path of death.

Jesus invites us instead not to be offended that *he, himself, alone* is sufficient. Yes, believing into Jesus will lead to all manner of blessing...and a cross. Yes, believing into Jesus will lead to a life of joy, peace, hope...and immersion into the world’s suffering for the sake of others’ salvation. Yes, all these other things will come, but first there is Jesus, offering himself, alone, the Bread that descends from heaven to feed our souls. I am reminded of Augustine’s famous maxim: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

The promise Jesus makes is the Spirit will draw us into this divine companionship. Luther assures us this will be a “drawing” not a “dragging” (425), for God invites faith, and the invitation comes in winsome whispers. Please don’t murmur when the Spirit whispers to you.

A Prayer of Heavenly Bread

Manna from Heaven, make me an instrument of joy,
when tempted to grumble, may I rejoice,
when tempted to complain, may I compliment,
when tempted to gripe, may I be of good cheer,
when tempted to grouse, may I give thanks,
when tempted to protest (too much), may I give praise,
when tempted to murmur, may I make merriment of heart and mind and soul.
Bread of Life, may I not so much seek
to get more as to ensure others get enough,
to want more things as to give myself to the one who is before me,
to settle for stuff when my soul is restless for Thee.
For it is in receiving that I learn to give,
it is in receiving manna from your abundance that I am able to share my blessings,
it is in receiving you that my hunger is quenched unto eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice your anxious, grumbling, murmuring spirit, as well as your humble, thankful, rejoicing spirit. How often does an “entitlement attitude” or “Me-First, Others-Never” creep into your heart or mind, your speech or actions? Consciously, intentionally, and with forethought, say thank you to others ten times today. Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 2, Wednesday – John 8:1-11

With the woman in the middle of a group of angry, hostile men, the rabbis accused her before Jesus. His response? Silence.

As Jesus bent down to write in the sand, one is left to wonder about the woman. Was she looking across the Temple courts or beyond the courts to the hills? From whence would come her help? I imagine for her sorrow or fear, that she was about to die, for the Law demanded as much (Leviticus 20:10), or anger at the injustice – her but not her partner?! – as powerful men used her as a pawn in their game against Jesus. Was this justice? Was this truly the will of the One who claimed to desire mercy more than sacrifice?

Having drawn attention away from the woman, Jesus uttered his verdict, "If any is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone." In his response, Jesus took the Bible both *literally* as well as *seriously*, honoring the Lord's command and the Lord's heart: judgment with humility, compassion with courage, justice with mercy.

And then he did it again: Jesus bent and wrote on the ground.

We often only notice the first time Jesus wrote on the ground. Having spoken truth, it seems as if he acknowledged that it was now God's job to let that truth speak to angry hearts. One by one, beginning with the oldest and most experienced rabbis, everyone left. St. Augustine noticed the grace in Jesus' stooping to write on the ground a second time, "But when the Lord had struck them with the shaft of justice, he deigned not to watch them collapse...." (506)

Jesus practiced that most delicate of dances. In the words of Archbishop Temple, "He did not condemn – but neither did he condone." (510) And I might add that, when offered the choice, Jesus placed greater value on the sacredness of the sinner over the solemnity of the sin. This is not to say that sin is insignificant, but that sinners are of eternal significance.

St. Augustine famously remarked, regarding the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery, "There were left alone two: the pitiable and Pity." (504) Two people standing together, alone, not unlike two lovers, but of an eternal love.

A Prayer of Holy Mercy

O Lord of Redemption, make me an instrument of your mercy,
where there is error, let me whisper correction,
where there is sin, let me call to repentance,
where there is omission, let me gently guide,
where there is commission, let me humbly rebuke,
where there is the hard heart, let me pray fervently,
where there is the broken heart, let me restore tenderly.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek my own goodness as your grace,
to police others as to pray for them,
to be always right as to live into *your* righteousness.
For it is in seeking our virtue that we discover our sin,
it is in our striving that we discover our failing,
it is in our stumbling that you deliver us unto eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice those moments when judgment flickers a bit more brightly than you care to admit. Notice those people who cause your chest to tighten as you hold your breath, the muscles in your neck tightening. Is there a prevailing sin of others that "triggers" you? Notice the hardness of your own heart toward Self and others! Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 2, Thursday – John 9:5-38

Many folks ask why Jesus made mud for the blind man's eyes, yet it is perfectly consistent with what John is conveying throughout the Gospel: In Jesus the whole cosmos is being remade - new life, new creation, a new cosmos beginning with this man, a new Adam, who had been blind from birth, but whose eyes were opened to all things, including Jesus, the Light of the World.

Isaiah had made it clear that it was Messiah's job to open the eyes of the blind:

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. (Isaiah 35:5)

I will make you... a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind.... (Isaiah 42:6-7)

It was Messiah's job to open the eyes of the blind. No one, ever, in all the Hebrew Scriptures, had opened the eyes of the blind, Still, all the religious authorities focused on was the fact that making mud was prohibited on the Sabbath!

The religious leadership attacked the man who now saw: "You are this fellow's disciple!" No words have been more truly spoken; no honor can be more deeply felt. What they intended as an indictment, we receive as praise. In the words of St. Augustine: "May this malediction be upon us all and upon our children." (593)

It cost the blind man a great deal to be Jesus' disciple, for the religious leadership proceeded to cast him out of the Temple. For the modern reader, to be excluded from a church is a terrible thing, but to be excluded from the Temple was far worse. Wengst cites rabbinical tradition to express the depths of the conundrum for the one cast out: "One sells them nothing and buys nothing from them. One takes nothing from them and gives them nothing." (587)

It may have cost him much to stand with Jesus, but the blind man did not seem to mind, for he continued to search for Jesus. Alas, his quest was fruitless: the blind man couldn't find Jesus. But *Jesus found the blind man*. Those whom the world rejects, Jesus seeks, with a love that will not stop until it is requited. William Temple wrote, "That the man did not find Jesus, but Jesus found him, is the deepest truth of Christian faith...Our fellowship with Him is rooted in His compassion." (597)

A Prayer of the Blind Seer

Lord of Light, make me an instrument of illumination,
where there is blindness, let me seek your vision,
where there is confusion, let me wait upon the Lord,
where there is vision, let me see clearly,
where there is darkness, let me shine your light,
where others seek rules, let me seek righteousness,
where others reject you, let me rejoice in you.

O Divine Light, grant that I may not so much seek
to listen to the culture as to hear the Christ,
to listen to much chatter as to heed his lone Voice,
to be led by others as to be sent by you.

For it is in hearing the Voice of Jesus that we are called,
it is in seeing the person of Jesus that we are commissioned,
it is in embracing the heart of Jesus that we come to eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice color. Try to describe blue or yellow or red. Sit in silence for five minutes and notice how many shades of brown or green you can see. Notice people's faces today: Do they wear the weight of sorrow or the fullness of joy? Notice people's eyes today: Are they shaded with grief or searching for hope? Notice your own seeing and your own blindness: Who do you not see? Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 2, Friday – John 11:1-18, 35-44

I invite you to engage your sacred imagination, to imagine yourself as Lazarus while in the tomb: Jesus' voice comes from all around and from within, from the center of the Earth to the outer reaches of the heavens it calls to you. Whether it is an actual voice you hear or merely your own breath, you cannot say for you do not know. What you know, what you experience, is the rush of wind filling your lungs, lightning flashes before your eyes, and then life.

“Lazarus, come out!”

Were Jesus' words to Lazarus more a command or an invitation? Perhaps they were both. Jesus spoke two, short Greek words: *deuro exo*, literally, "Here!" "Out!" (685) I find this brevity to be palpable and compelling: no meandering, no rambling, no hesitancy. Just get to the point, and the point is life.

Lazarus came out.

Entering again your sacred imagination, as you walk into the light of your new life, you know that the clothes of death are wrapped around you. Yet you also understand, more deeply and with painfully acute insight, that your grave clothes come from within your spirit and soul much more than what has been wrapped around your mortal flesh: your attitudes and your actions, your lack of courage and your lack of compassion, your hostility that triumphed over your humility, your pride that paraded as confidence but hid an arrogance. These are the true clothes of death. And you wear them well.

Jesus invites you to come out.

The journey of believing into Jesus is a daily exercise in spiritual nakedness, of unwrapping our grave clothes one layer at a time. One day we will all return to our tombs, of course, (though hopefully not for a very long time), and in that latter day, when death finally comes, I pray we await it with purpose. I pray that, like Lazarus, we who have glimpsed beyond the veil that sheaths heaven and earth will discover the tremendous freedom that comes from leaving our grave clothes where they belong: in the tomb. I pray we will walk into Life.

A Prayer of St. Lazarus

Lord of Newness into Life, make me as one clothed by you,

where I wear grave clothes, let me undress,

where I wear pride, clothe me with humility,

where I wear greed, clothe me with generosity,

where I wear fear, clothe me with courage,

where I wear anger, clothe me with calm,

where I wear hostility, clothe me with mercy.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek

to avoid death as to embrace life,

to seek safety in all things as to affirm the only thing that matters:

to rejoice that in body and in soul, in life and in death,

I belong to you, my faithful Savior.

For it is in confessing my brokenness that I begin the journey of becoming,

it is in confessing my sin that I am gifted with salvation,

it is in taking off my grave clothes that I walk into eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice the grave clothes you wear today. What attitudes and actions do you need to renounce? Where must you hear God exclaim to your Self, “Here! Out!” Notice the lightened burden upon your release of those things connected with a walking death. Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 2, Saturday – John 11:17-28

Martha, concerned and tidy, always busy doing what is needful, is portrayed in the gospels as active; Martha is the patron saint of church kitchen committees everywhere, which hardly does her justice for she was a first-rate theologian! Consider:

Evidence #1: As the disciples approached Bethany to pay their respects, Martha approached the Master and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Can you believe that? She accused Jesus to his face! The best theologians are saucy and bold.

Evidence #2: It is of interest that Martha called Jesus both "Teacher" and "Lord." In first century Israel, other rabbis refused to instruct women, yet Jesus treated Martha with respect and as a worthy enough adversary to be a disciple.

Evidence #3: Martha spoke traditional Jewish theology when she said, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." While not all Jews of Jesus' day believed in resurrection, the majority opinion accepted the notion that all Jews - sorry, Gentiles, but you were not included in the resurrection - all Jews would be resurrected on the Lord's Day. Brown reports that by the latter half of the first century the belief in resurrection "would become a part of the official prayers of Judaism as the second of the *Eighteen Benedictions*: 'You, O Lord, are mighty forever for you give life to the dead.'" (670)

Jesus responded to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Here we have Jesus' promise of life for the body - "Whoever believes in me will live, even though he (or she) dies" - and life for the soul - "whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Wengst summarizes the scholarly consensus regarding Jesus' proclamation: "Death is not ignored, but it is denied that it has ultimate significance, that it has the last word." (671)

Evidence #4: Was there a twinkle in Jesus' eyes when Martha confessed, and not just any confession but a triple confession, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the Anointed who was to come into the world." Is it too much to call Martha the *prima theologa*, the first theologian, of the Christian Church?

A Prayer of St. Martha

Lord of Living Thought, make me an instrument of sacred contemplation,

where there is a mystery to ponder, let me behold it,

where there is a note of wonder, let me embrace it,

where there is a question to ask, let me bold to ask it,

where there is Truth that points beyond me, let me not flinch,

where there is a good word to be spoken, let me speak it,

where there is a confession to make, let me declare it.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

to be always right as to be always growing,

to know all the answers as to ask any question,

to ignore the difficult as to wrestle with the Word.

For it is in engaging questions that we are embraced by the Truth,

it is in wrestling with Jesus that we discover the Christ,

it is in confessing Christ that we are led to resurrection and eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice the underlying questions you and others raise throughout the day. Are they questions of economic sustenance, physical fragility, social curiosity, parental fear? Notice if any of *your* questions focus your attention on what God is doing today – in, upon, around, and through you. Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 3, Monday – John 11:29-32 and 12:1-3

A party was given in Jesus' honor, a thank you to Jesus from the family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, a small token for resuscitating Lazarus. Jesus was the guest of honor, but Mary, Lazarus' sister and the Gospels chief contemplative, stole the show.

The story is told in the *Talmud* of a Jewish mother who had seven sons. Each son, in his own turn, was elected a High Priest of Israel. When the people came to the mother to ask how it was that she could be so blessed of the Lord that each of her seven sons would ascend to High Priest, she answered, "Not even the rafters of my own home have ever seen my hair." Such was the purity associated with a woman's hair. According to first century mores, this mother was a woman of honor.

Keener relates the scandal of Mary's actions: "Given the taboos of the very pious against even speaking with women, and undoubtedly the suspicions of most people...her action would probably seem immoral." (698) The act itself bordered on the sexual; it did not stray quite that far but was most sensual at the very least.

Throughout history, there exists a struggle between money spent for devotional purposes versus money spent for missional purposes: Both have their place within God's kingdom, yet it is instructive to note that Jesus accepted and even embraced Mary's devotion. Jesus understood that devotion and mission are not mutually exclusive parts of the gospel; rather they are connected, inseparable, as integrated within the true Gospel as the head and the heart are within the human being.

The true Gospel honors Jesus as Lord of lords, and in this centering on the *person* of Christ there is ignited a centrifugal energy that flows outward toward the *purpose* of Christ. Mary's devotion, centered on Jesus, will keep "the preferential option for the poor" alive in ways that Judas' bland compassion never can.

Ah, yes, Judas. We will speak more of him tomorrow. Suffice it to say that as Mary's sacred aroma wafted about the room, borne on the scent of a contemplative's devotion as much as her perfume, Judas stewed.

A Prayer of St. Mary

Lord, make me an instrument of your devotion,
where there is a prayer to pray, let me pray it,
where there is Scripture to read, let me read it,
where there is praise to be sung, let me sing it,
where is my heart, let me feel,
where is my mind, let me ponder,
where is my soul, let me seek first your Kingdom.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to do as to be,
to figure out as to meditate upon,
to decide for myself as to wait upon the Lord.
For it is in meditation that reflection is purified,
it is in contemplation that communion is fulfilled,
it is in union with you that I am glorified unto eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice those hints and whispers of your inner person that resist the lure of the Spirit. Is your resistance connected to particular people, certain situations, or the measure of difficulty related to a task? Notice those hints and whispers that draw you in the Spirit's tether, that release honest, authentic devotion. Is devotion easier in a particular place, a certain time, or connected to a form of spiritual discipline? Heed the wisdom of the spiritual fathers and mothers: "Pray as you can, not as you cannot." Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 3, Tuesday – John 12:4-11

Judas Iscariot. The first name is infamous, but his surname is instructive. The Sicarii were first century, Jewish zealots, whose hatred against Rome, against its oppression, against its presence among God's people and in God's Promised Land, burned as unquenchable flame. Judas the Zealot.

I imagine Judas had his suspicions about Jesus before this moment, but when he saw the way Jesus allowed Lazarus' sisters to speak to him, and the way he allowed Mary to touch him publicly, Judas' decision was made: *Jesus* was too weak to be Messiah, too constrained by love to unleash the proper amount of bloodshed required to uproot the Romans from their land.

Raising Lazarus was beyond miraculous, so Judas never doubted that Jesus was a great man, even a man of God, but could he *function* as Messiah? Did Jesus have the moxie to lead an army, to call forth their brothers to the sword? Sure, resuscitating a dead man was impressive, but what did Jesus think they were going to do? Love the Romans into submission? Transform them into God-fearers through love? It was preposterous – it had become too much.

The perfume Mary poured out upon Jesus was worth a year's worth of wages! Can you imagine giving that much money as an act of devotion? Judas was incredulous! That Jesus would allow such a waste went against everything he had taught about "the least of these my brothers and sisters." Judas objected, of course. "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?"

When Jesus said to him, "Leave her alone. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial," Judas knew then what he must do. Jesus wanted to elevate this lowly woman above his disciples? Fine. Judas would turn his heart away from the promise of his alleged Kingdom. Jesus expected to die? Fine. Judas would wash his hands of this dreamy-eyed Lover. "You will always have the poor among you," he told Judas, "but you will not always have me." Fine. Judas would ensure that he was correct.

And in his anger, Judas perished.

A Prayer of Judas

Lord in your mercy, show me what it means to allow my life to be restored,

when anger devours, may it not be my own soul,

when "righteousness" consumes, may I not be its feast,

when "virtue" wolfs down a meal, may it not be me.

In my fierceness, may I not be blind,

in my certitude, may I not be deaf,

in my severity, may I avoid brutality to body or soul.

O Divine Master, may I not so much seek

to cast out the unrighteous as to walk beside them,

to make others like me as to become like you,

to lead with the sword as to trust the Dove from above.

For it is the clear mirror that betrays my soul's true need,

it is in looking inward that I see what I must become,

it is not in others but in you that freedom is found unto eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice the way power and authority function around you. Who has it and who does not? Who wields power in service to one's Self, and who wields it in service to others? Notice the ways you seek it and the ways you gift it to others. Notice the ways you crave it, or fear it. Notice how easy it is, or how difficult, to let it go and let God be Lord over your day. Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 3, Wednesday – John 11:45-57

We return in today's reading to the end of chapter 11, to the prelude of Judas' story, to Caiaphas, for without Caiaphas, there is no Judas.

In Caiaphas we learn that irony is a spiritual gift. It must be, right? For is there a more ironic statement in the Gospel than Caiaphas' prophecy, "It is better for you that one man dies for the people than that the whole nation perish"? What Caiaphas intended as political calculation God divined as sovereign, sacred purpose.

For Caiaphas, the "math" requiring Jesus' execution was a rather simple matter. The Romans were suspicious and brutal toward anything and anyone who hinted at rebellion. Messianic claimants before Jesus and after Jesus were numerous. From the revolt of Judas the Galilean which ended with 2,000 men crucified and lining the streets leading out of Jerusalem (6 Common Era), to the Jewish revolt that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and Masada (66-70 C.E.), to the Bar Kochba rebellion that virtually emptied Palestine of Israelites (135 C.E.), Rome did not tolerate threat. Jewish messianism, with its blend of nationalism and militarism, raised the hackles of Roman leaders, and Caiaphas was realist enough to know the consequence of allowing Jesus to be viewed as Messiah.

What Caiaphas intended for evil, God intended for good. God used Caiaphas' realism in service of divine purpose: God called the nations into the Kingdom, for "the scattered children of God." Again, we may thank Isaiah for preparing the Way for the Lord:

Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord.' (2:3)

Turn to me and be saved, *all the ends of the earth.* (45:21)

I often wonder about our postmodern need to live insulated, hermetically-sealed, and above all else *safe* lives. We seek to avoid unpleasantness at all costs! But are such choices the Way of Jesus? Do they reflect the life of costly, self-giving that Jesus freely embraced? What would happen if we chose to follow Jesus into the world for the sake of the world? What power might be unleashed by Christian community willing to sacrifice personal comfort for communal care, private benefit for public blessing?

A Prayer of Caiaphas

God of Justice and Truth, make me an instrument of divine purpose,
where others flinch, help me stand, or kneel, but do it to your glory,

where others wilt, help me to flourish,

where others falter, help me step forward,

where others stutter, help me speak clearly,

where others pretend muteness, help me find my true voice,

where others swallow fear, help me feast on righteous anger.

O God who was willing to offer Jesus a cross, may I not so much seek
to avoid discomfort at all costs as to allow its strengthening touch to lay its hand upon me,
to insulate myself from all suffering as to allow its cruciform fire to refine me,
to seek the way of "Peace! Peace!" when there is no peace as to embrace the Way of the Cross.

For it is in taking up my cross that Jesus' own cross is not denied,
it is in taking up my cross daily that Jesus' words are affirmed in spirit and in truth,
it is in Jesus' death that I am offered a life eternal that cannot be taken away.

Go into the world... Notice convenience. Acknowledge it. Accept that you embrace convenience throughout your day. Accept that you prefer convenience to inconvenience. Now ask yourself, "Do you *prefer* convenience or do you *need* convenience; are you its master or its servant?" Notice also those moments when you lift your wants, desires, and needs to God: Are they lifted up for the sake of God's purpose or primarily for your convenience? Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 3, Thursday – John 13:10-17, 34-38

Jesus told Peter he would understand later, not that night, that Jesus was setting an example about how to love. He, the Master, was acting as a servant; we, the servants, were not and are not greater than the Master. Then Jesus gave a new command: "Love one another," which hardly seemed new. Moreover, John tells us that Jesus, having loved his own who were in the world, now showed them the full extent of his love. Let's pause for just a moment to ponder that phrase: "the full extent of his love." What is the full extent of *Jesus'* love?

Jesus used a sophisticated double entendre in the Greek to imply both "love *in the same fashion* I have loved you" as well as "love *from the source with which* I have loved you." (796) The first meaning is example; the second is enabling. The first meaning is path; the second is power. The first is how one is to live; the second is how one can live.

Peter did, indeed, love Jesus, but he remained too full of himself. While he was "too humble" to receive Jesus' service to himself at the beginning of the evening, he was "too proud" to accept the truth about his service to Jesus at the end of the evening. As Calvin warned: "Peter, humanly, attributes too much to his own strength. Let us learn to distrust our own strength." (799)

Peter mistakenly believed, as many Christians mistakenly believe, that the Christian faith is about what he would do for Jesus; following Jesus, Peter assumed, was all about his believing, his devotion, his service on behalf of the Lord. Peter was blind to the reality that following Jesus is primarily about allowing Jesus to live in, among and through one's own life. If John 13 teaches anything, it is that our devotion and service to Jesus are a fading memory compared to the importance of Jesus' service and devotion to us.

Bruner describes the absurdity of Peter's pride: "We can almost hear Jesus saying..., 'How many times do I have to tell you: You are not the hero in this story.'" (801) Poor Peter, in his pride, he could not believe it when Jesus told him that, before the rooster crowed, he would deny Jesus three times. Peter knew Jesus was wrong. He was wrong - WRONG! There was no way Peter would ever deny Jesus. Not that night, not ever. Never! No way! It was not possible. He wasn't like that. Right? And neither are we! Right?

A Prayer of St. Peter

Lord of Compassion, make me an instrument of your care,
where there is a need, let me fill it,
where there is greed, let me reject it,
where others are forgotten, let me remember,
where others are forsaken, let me walk with them to the cross,
where there is neglect, let me show concern,
where there is abuse, let me sow healing.
Compassionate One, grant that I may not so much seek
to exalt myself as to embrace humility,
to be puffed up as to be poured out,
to seek my own as to serve my brother and sister.
For it is in lifting up others that we ourselves are raised,
it is in washing the feet of the poor that we discover the riches of the Christ,
it is in following the way of Jesus that he leads us to eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice those who serve you. Notice the intricate web of human community among those who serve you directly – caregivers, grocers, teachers, parents – and those who serve you indirectly – neighbors, officers, air traffic controllers, road crews. Notice and be thankful that you are not the most important person in the universe, nor even our little corner of it, and yet are called to do your part in, with, through and for the love of Jesus. Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 3, Friday – John 14:1-14

Two questions, one answer. The questions were asked by Thomas (explicitly) and Philip (implicitly). Thomas' question – “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way? – was, like Thomas, practical, concrete, and reasonable: He wanted directions. Jesus was talking about a place, so, of course, Thomas wanted to know how to get there! One has the sense that Philip's (implicit) question – “Lord, will you show us the Father? – was filled with longing, desire, and emotion: he wanted so badly to know the Father. Two questions, one answer.

The one answer is found in the person of Jesus.

Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life; and Jesus shows us the Father. This truth forms the foundation upon which Gospel evangelism moves out in ever-widening circles and has been affirmed in every era of Church ministry. From ancient times – Augustine, “Walk by the Man and thou wilt arrive at God” (822) – to the Medieval Church – Thomas a Kempis, “Without the way there is no going; without the truth there is no knowing; without the life there is no living” (823) – to more modern sentiments – Bultmann, “...the possibility of seeing God is inherent in the fellowship with Jesus.” (815)

Our postmodern heartburn revolves around our right, good, and proper recognition and respect that we live in a complex world. No, I need to state that better: we live *with others* in a complex world. What, then, are we to make of these verses in light of the complexity, beauty, and promise invited by other faiths? C.S. Lewis may suggest a gentle, yet firm, way forward, “God has not told us what His arrangements about other people are. We do know that no one can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.” (823-824) In other words, let God worry about being gracious, for God is much better at it than we are. And has much more practice.

What, then, is left for us to worry about? Very little actually. For Gregory of Nazianzus provides this assurance, “There will be an abundance and rest in these plentiful rooms” (821), while Theodore of Mopsuestia offers this confidence, “Christ has already taken care of the reservations.” (821) What, then, is left to ask? Whatever your question, there is but One answer.

A Prayer of St. Philip

O Lord, make me an instrument of reflection upon your glory,
where there is worry, let me wonder,
where there is consternation, let me hope,
where others celebrate brokenness, let me reflect wholeness,
where others spew vitriol, let me reflect gentleness,
when tempted to look away, let me look up,
when tempted to see sin all around, let me set my eyes upon Jesus.
O Holy One who shows us God, grant that I may not so much seek
to judge the eternity of others as to embrace the love you offer to all,
to define who is “in” and who is “out” as to be thankful I am your beloved child,
to worry if my “mansion” will be big enough as to rest assured I will be with you.

For it is in living the Way that we discover Jesus is the Truth,
it is in embracing Jesus as the Truth that we immerse ourselves into his Life,
it is in his Life that our lives become eternal, a gift of your good grace.

Go into the world... Notice the moments you are conscious of living the Way of Jesus during the day. At what moments are you operating on “auto-pilot,” even if for long stretches of the day? At what moments, even if for long stretches of the day, are you aware of your seeking, of your spiritual intentionality, to live the Way of Jesus? What difference does such mindfulness make in what you do and how you do it, in your sense of wholeness, integrity and peace? Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 3, Saturday – John 15:1-17

First one and *then* the other. First God and *then* us. Augustine put it this way, “It is not that we keep His commandments first, and that then He loves [us]; but that He loves us, and then we keep His commandments. That is that grace which is revealed to the humble but hidden from the proud. (887) And in this verse, we learn that love comes from abiding.

Having alarmed the disciples in chapter 14 that he would be taking a trip, Jesus next talked of home. The English words used in translations of John 15 include such words as “remain,” “continue with,” and “stick with.” However, older translators used a word now somewhat out of fashion: “abide,” which, interestingly, is a cognate for “abode,” which means home.

Love comes from abiding with Jesus, from making *Jesus* our true home.

John *really* loves this way of describing what faith looks like. Nearly 80% of Gospel usages of abide are found in John. Bultmann writes, “The demand for loyalty is heard...but this loyalty that is demanded is not primarily a continued being *for* but a continued being *from*; it is not the holding of a position, but an allowing oneself to be held.” (898-899) Simply put: Jesus loves us so we can go love the world; there is no other way for Christian love to bear fruit.

The nature of our fruit bearing is debated by preachers. Some equate fruit with evangelism. Some equate it with building stewardship accounts. Some connect it to Paul’s fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. All these blessings are good things, certainly, but the context talks about love. Love for God, love for one another, love for those who suffer from injustice, love for our enemies. This is the life to which we are called. It is *this* kind of love the world so seldom sees yet so desperately needs to see.

Bearing the fruit of love will not happen on our own, of our own power or our own purpose. William Temple comments, “*Abide in me* and *Love one another* are not two things but one thing with two aspects, whereof the former is the occasion of the latter.” (894) Without Jesus as our home, our love will falter, will wither on the vine, will dry up. And then where will we be?

“Abide in me as I also abide in you,” invites Jesus. In other words, “Come home.”

A Prayer of Abiding

Lord, you are the Vine and we are the branches,
so make me an instrument that bears the fruit of love,
where injustice is common, use me to confront the powers,
where deception prevails, use me to speak truth to principalities,
where brokenness is experienced, use me to heal,
where illness is suffered, use me to comfort,
where one is alone, use me as your presence,
where others know not Jesus, use me to invite them home.

O Divine Keeper of Sacred Gardens, may I not so much seek
to bear my own fruit as to bear *your* fruit,
to love of my own strength as to love with *your* strength,
to show others how to love as to show others *you, yourself, alone*.

For it is in being rooted and grounded in you that love grows,
it is in being connected as a branch to you, the True Vine, that love extends,
it is in abiding in you, with you, and through you that love claims us for eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice the source of your living. From where do you draw strength? Comfort? Purpose? Peace? Does your love of others come from you or from another – God, your spouse, parents, boss, or a neighbor’s disapproving look? How conscious are you of being rooted and grounded in Jesus as the source of your daily loving? Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 4, Monday – John 17:20-26

Night had fallen. Judas had left to do the work of betrayal. A Passover Seder like none other was coming to an end, and it was left to Jesus, the Head of this most unusual household, to pray a final prayer.

What strikes me in this prayer is Jesus' heart seems about to burst.

Jesus knew his time on earth was complete, knew the hour was upon him. The horizon of his crucifixion had become a lonesome valley before him, the time of wrestling the powers and principalities of the world was nigh, a mortal struggle between Night and Day with eternity to the victor. Jesus knew he was to be, in John's charmingly ironic phrase, "glorified." The glory Jesus was to receive would not be like that of a Caesar or an Olympian but the glory of *his* humiliation, the heights of Gehenna's *depths*, *his* crown of thorns, *his* cross.

With all this before him, Jesus prayed for his friends, for these women and men whom he loved, who would themselves bear a terrible heartache as they watched their Master suffer. Yes, Jesus' heart was about to burst.

I am told by Bruner, who knows Greek far better than me, there is an intensification in Jesus' attitude throughout this prayer. (1010) By 17:24, Jesus is pleading, imploring, and beseeching the Father that his disciples – that you and me, together as one – may share a sacred unity, a unity that mirrors the unity shared by the Father and the Son: "just as you are in me and I am in you." Jesus knows this unity is essential to our mission, for the world will know we are sent by God as we live into and act out of this unity. Jesus knows this unity is sweet and life-giving and precious.

Jesus also knows this unity is not ours to create, only ours to receive.

We often talk and act as if Christian unity is our job. I suppose that's one way to think about it, but Jesus talked – indeed, he prayed – as if our unity is something *God* gives rather than something *we* create. Perhaps that's why we're so bad at this unity thing. We've been trusting in our own power rather than God's gift. Are we able to stop trying to create something that has already been gifted to us? Are we willing and able to receive the gift of our unity, the glad heart of Jesus?

A Prayer of Christian Unity

Lord, make us vessels of Christian unity,
where there is discord, help us remain open to your peace,
where there is rupture, help us remain open to your mending,
where there is hostility, help us remain open to your loving,
when we struggle to speak with civility, help us remain open to your Voice,
where we find it difficult to honor each other, help us remain open to your Call,
when all we see are our differences, help us remain open to the Christ in one another.

One God, Blessed Trinity forever, help us not so much seek
to be unique as to celebrate each other's uniqueness,
to be the best as to affirm each other's gifts,
to know Jesus as my "personal Savior" as to allow
"The Christ in me speak to the Christ in you that we may be one in Him."

For it is in *your* union that our unity is grounded,
it is in the life you share together that our lives are founded,
it is in you, O Blessed Trinity, we are invited to the dance of eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice your desire and fear of togetherness. How well do you balance speaking your conscience and giving others the space, and the freedom, to speak their own? How comfortable are you living in the balance between being who you are and accepting that others may be different? Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 4, Tuesday – John 18:28 – 19:20

I imagine Pilate disturbed, haunted, mystified by Jesus. Pilate, the Roman governor of an Israelite province, the one who ordered Jesus to be crucified, did not know what to make of the man who stood before him. Pilate knew what was desired of him: condemn this man. He just wasn't sure why he should; he wondered that maybe he should not.

Pilate was certainly to blame for Jesus' condemnation, although it was not his fault. He bears full responsibility, although the matter was taken out of his hands by the leadership who threatened to accuse him before Caesar: "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." Pilate took this threat seriously. Being a "Friend of Caesar," what was known as *Amicus Caesaris*, meant power and protection. Pilate could not allow his status as a friend to Caesar to be compromised. (1090)

These were the same people whose Eleventh Benediction of the *Shemoneh Esreh* prayed to God, "May you rule over us, you alone," whose Greater *Hallel* in the Passover *Haggadah* prayed, "From everlasting to everlasting thou art God; beside thee we have no king, redeemer or savior...We have no king but thee." (1092-1093) Yet they told Pilate, "We have no king but Caesar." Pilate knew then what he must do. After all, he was only a governor – what choice did he have?

Pilate was a governor, but Jesus was the King.

There are twelve references to *basileus*, king, in this passage and three more to *basileia*, kingdom. (1081) Throughout the passage, the question of Jesus' true identity invades the mind: Who is truly in charge here? Who is the true sovereign? Who is king? As much as Pilate questioned Jesus, even more did Jesus interrogate Pilate.

Pilate was unsettled, to be sure, and not just for political reasons. You see, Jesus was seeking *Pilate's* soul, and Pilate could sense it. "Everyone on the side of the truth listens to me," Jesus told Pilate. *Everyone?* Is this correct? And by "everyone" did Jesus include Pilate as well? Ultimately Pilate made his choice. The sham was complete: The Lamb of God without fault was to be sacrificed for the sake of the people. As Bruner writes, "He who did *nothing* wrong was condemned for *everything* so that we who have done *everything* wrong would be condemned for nothing." (1084)

A Prayer of Pontius Pilate

Lord, did you use me as your instrument of salvation?

Or was I but a pawn and not an instrument of your peace?

Was there a method to the madness?

Was there a purpose to his passion?

Is there truly a Way beyond my perceiving?

Is there truly a Truth beyond my sight?

Is Jesus truly a King beyond my understanding?

O Divine Master of the Universe, grant that I may not so much seek

to protect my reputation as to do what is right...next time,

to play the game as to be who I would like to be...next time,

to pray to an Unknown God as to bow before Jesus...next time.

For it is in seeking a Truth beyond my courage that reality is unveiled,

it is in a kingdom not of this world that sacred royalty is found,

it is in Jesus of Nazareth that I will meet Israel's King...and my own...next time.

Go into the world... Notice the many, varied, and pernicious ways you seek to look good in the eyes of others. What masks do you wear? How adept are you at shading truth? Do you get fidgety knowing others will be disappointed if you make a certain choice, even if you believe the choice conforms to Truth, expresses the Way, and contributes to Life? What encourages you to speak the truth in love? Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 4, Wednesday – John 20:1-18

John begins his retelling of this First Morning with three references to time: Early in the morning, on the first day, while it was still dark. John, with his love of metaphor, is not trying to describe the ancient equivalent of "O Dark Thirty." Rather, John is speaking theologically: this is the dawning of a new day, a new era for all humanity, a Genesis of new creation.

When Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb, she was in a state: panicked, overwhelmed, wailing, moaning. What the Psalmist calls lament may be a better description. Mary was a mess – until she saw the angels.

Commentators note the similarity between the two angels on either side of the tomb and the two cherubim who sit on either side of the mercy seat on the Holy of Holies: blood sprinkled over death, giving life. (1151) Just as commentators note the similarity between Jesus' empty tomb and God's Mercy Seat, so do they observe the rich imagery of the garden in Scripture from the beginning to this New Beginning: From the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Easter, from first Adam to second Adam, from mortal curse to eternal blessing, from physical death to resurrection life. (1149)

As Mary emerged from this stone womb there appeared - whether he had been there all along or simply appeared is uncertain - but there came one whose eyes were love, whose countenance was compassion and whose voice, when he finally spoke, was both thunder and whisper. "Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Mary must have thought the man was the gardener for she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

As soon as he next spoke, everything changed. It was the shortest sermon ever preached. It was as beautiful as a sonnet, as intimate as a kiss; it was restoration and promise, the dawning and culmination of redemption in a single word. I imagine that moment and wonder at all that changed in the taking of a single breath: the significance of the human soul, the meaning of human life, the purpose of history itself. None of these things would ever be the same.

"Mary," is all he said, but it was Jesus who said it.

A Prayer of St. Mary Magdalene

Lord of the Resurrection, make me an instrument of hope,
where others hang on, let me let go,
where others hang back, let me surge forward,
where others seek yesterday, let me grip tomorrow,
where others hold ever the past, let me grab ever your future,
where others yearn for what was, let me dream of what can be,
where others hug Jesus' knees, let me embrace his heart.

O Risen Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to avoid death as to proclaim life,
to delight in my glory days as to declare your glorious works,
to wallow in memories as to wade into mission.
For it is in leaving the womb that the breath of Spirit comes,
it is in leaving the tomb that we find it empty forever,
it is in meeting Jesus that we are sent in his name to proclaim eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice how often you look back versus how often you look forward. How often do you seek to be settled versus how difficult is it for you to allow Divine Disturbance into your life? How easily do you crave a premature answer versus how open are you to discerning the gentle breeze of God's Spirit nudge? Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 4, Thursday – John 20:19-29

In the long history of the church, Thomas has been the patron saint of doubters everywhere. But not only is Thomas the patron saint of doubters but of scientists, philosophers and skeptics. It was Thomas who was willing to “go and die with him” in chapter 11; Thomas who observed they “did not know where he was going so how could they know the way” in chapter 14. Thomas was the ultimate realist.

Interestingly, the resurrected Jesus did not give a dissertation on heaven and the afterlife but rather gave directions on how to proceed forward in this life: go as sent people, *apostoleos* in Greek, apostles in English, literally “sent-ones.” Jesus sent and is sending the disciples out in his name, even as the Father sent Jesus.

This mission - the disciples' being sent - is not given for them to do all alone, by themselves. Rather Jesus breathed on them the gift of Holy Spirit: *ruach* in the Hebrew, *pneuma* in the Greek, breath and spirit in both languages. The intimacy of breathing upon the disciples is a powerful symbol, for whose breath does one ever experience face to face as the disciples experienced with Jesus: a mother and infant at the breast? Two lovers? A dying comrade on the battlefield and the friend seeking to save him? These are images of intimacy. Jesus breathed upon them, sharing an intimacy that filled them with Holy Spirit: How else can we ever expect to fulfill the work for which we are being sent?

It happened again the next week, on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, the day of resurrection. Again the disciples were together. Jesus seemed always to do his most powerful works in community, as if Holy Communion with him required a holy community with one another. General morality or generic spirituality are unworthy of Christ-followers. As Bruner reminds: "One gets the impression that John's Gospel promises that wherever there is an appreciated and living Christ-centeredness, it will be well with the Church." (1162)

Thomas fell to his knees and worshipped Jesus: "My Lord and my God!" It was absolutely and utterly forbidden for Jews to worship a human, a mere man, but Jesus was so much more than mere humanity. This is why Thomas spoke the words used only when speaking of the Lord: *kyrie* and *theos*. He had come to believe into Jesus with his whole mind, and his heart followed.

A Prayer of St. Thomas

Lord of Living Truth, make me a vessel of full and robust believing,
where there is distrust of the Story, let me hear the convictions of others,
where there seem to be discrepancies, let me seek the unity of the commonalities,

where there is doubt, let me not despair,

where there is perplexity, let me always persevere,

where I am blind, help me to listen well,

where I am deaf, help me to see clearly.

O Living Lord, grant that I may not so much seek

my own truth as the fullness of your Truth,

to be full of my own speaking as to be guided by your Word,

to follow my own sense of things as to listen for your Spirit.

For it is in believing that we accept,

it is in accepting that we discover our belovedness,

it is in our belovedness that we are delivered unto eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice your questions and the questions of others. I am less concerned, even unconcerned, about the content of these questions, and ask you to be more focused on the questions' sub-text. Need for approval? Need to win? Seeking to connect? Seeking help? What do the questions *you* ask tell you about the current locale of your spiritual journey? Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 4, Friday – John 21:1-17

Peter's predicament reminds one of the story of the old Louisiana preacher in the bayou who was examining the baby-faced, fresh-scrubbed, young 'un straight out of seminary. "Child," asked the old preacher, "have you lived enough to have sinned enough to have been forgiven enough to truly preach the gospel?" Newbigin remarks, "If Peter has a primacy among the apostles, it is because he has primacy as a forgiven sinner." (1236)

It was night when the disciples went out to fish, and they caught nothing. Here we hear echoes: "[Judas] went out. And it was night" (13:30); and, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (15:5). These are more than descriptions of time and effectiveness when fishing; they are John speaking theology through metaphor: the time of darkness is any time we are without Jesus, and without him all our human efforts are for nothing. But darkness gives way to light - "Early in the morning" - at the dawn of a new day Jesus stood by the shore. And all was made new.

I imagine Peter taken aback upon coming ashore: The last time he had been around a charcoal fire was *that* night, in the courtyard warming his hands. It was there Peter denied Jesus. I imagine Peter had tried to avoid all such charcoal fires in the weeks since that time; with their unique smell, Peter could not abide. Was Jesus trying to tell Peter something?

Jesus led Peter, and all the disciples, into the deep truth that one's forgiveness of sins comes through communion with Jesus. Commentators see a Eucharistic allusion in verse 13: "Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them." Brown comments that "in primitive [Christian] iconography, meals of bread and fish (rather than of bread and wine) were the standard pictorial symbols of the Eucharist." (1221) Here is a powerful reminder of the importance not only of Christian community but of Christian communion. We are designed to be with and for one another, and our togetherness as Christian community is centered in Christ.

I imagine Peter came to love the smell of a charcoal fire. I imagine Peter hurrying to it, standing as close as he could get so the scent of the charcoal would permeate his clothing. Then, later, as he breathed in the husky stench of the soot, he would remember the last time he shared a meal with Jesus. Breathing more deeply still, Peter would engulf the soot into his lungs. It smelled like forgiveness.

A Second Prayer of St. Peter

Lord of Redemption, make me an instrument of your pastoral care,
where there is a lost lamb, let me seek him,
where there is a hungry lamb, let me feed her,
where there are wayward sheep, let me guide them,
where there are errant sheep, let me corral them,
where there are deaf sheep, let me mimic your Voice,
where there are mute sheep, let me help them find their voices.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to call others "sinners" as to confess my own sin,
to be forgiven as to forgive,
to be restored as to restore.

For it is in seeking your lambs that we discover we are lost,
it is in finding your sheep that we discover we are found,
it is in loving you, truly loving you, that we learn you have already loved us unto eternal life.

Go into the world... Notice the lost lambs in your world. Who is alone? Who needs your time? Who needs your ear? Who needs kindness? Who are the ones straying into wolf territory unawares? And the next time you're around a bonfire: celebrate God's forgiveness! Notice. Pray. Act.

SAINTS ALIVE! MEDITATIONS FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL

Advent 4, Saturday – John 1:35-50 and 20:28-31

Chapters 1 and 20 are bookends to the Gospel. Chapter one shares the most important truth one can ever learn about evangelism: The best evangelism is the sharing of one friend to another about one's personal encounter with Jesus. This passage is a ladder of such sharing: John the Baptizer told Andrew (and another, unnamed disciple), Andrew told Simon Peter, Andrew or Peter presumably told Philip and so prepared him for Jesus' command to "follow me," and then, finally, Philip told Nathanael about Jesus.

On this ladder of sharing, we see that each one speaks of Jesus in a different way, to help the hearer listen and accept the good news. John spoke to his own disciples about Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Andrew spoke quite simply when he told his brother Peter that Jesus was "the Messiah." Philip, speaking to Nathanael, highlighted the connection between the Law and the Prophets and Jesus: "...the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote..."

Bruner says of this kind of evangelism:

We most naturally want to approach people at their point of greatest interest. Philip does not offer Jesus as the answer, say, to a problem of guilt or as the possibility for a vocation or even as the Savior of souls. He commends Jesus at the point of the Law and the Prophets...Philip...apparently knew Nathanael's main interest – Scripture study – and so addressed him there. (109)

Philip's words lead to Nathanael's exclamation, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel," which commentators see as a reference to Daniel 7:13-14: "He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." Nathanael's acclamation is the last of the 17 titles ascribed to Jesus in chapter one, and it is foreshadowing. Nathanael's confession promises at the beginning of the Gospel what Thomas' confession fulfills at the end of the Gospel, and which both invite from you and from me: a confession of Jesus as "My Lord and my God."

*A Prayer of St. Andrew**

O Lord of the Good News, make us instruments of your grace,
where there is judgment, let us sow clemency;
where there is hypocrisy, let us show integrity;
where there is clamor, let us speak the truth gently and in love;
where others are broken, let us sow blessing;
where others are crushed in spirit, let us sow conviction of soul;
where others scorn, let us speak of the sacred with humility and hope.

O Divine Sower, let us not so much seek to be heard as to hear,
to argue against as to be with,
to avoid darkness as to shine light.

For it is in sharing with others that we learn of our own need,
it is in sharing good news that we learn to become it,
it is in offering grace that we finally and fully learn how to embrace eternal life.

**Though today's devotional was written from Philip, Nathanael, and Thomas' perspective, Andrew is the patron saint of evangelism and so the prayer is written in his honor.*

Go into the world... Notice the opportunities you have to speak of God, to tell a story that connects your faith to your day, or even to offer a simple blessing or prayer. Remember who shared with you the good news of God's love and offer that gift to another. Notice. Pray. Act.