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Looking out the window this morning, the snow is gently falling. The ground and trees are covered in a glistening pure white layer of snow. My favorite piano music is softly playing in the background as I sip a cup of steaming hot tea. It has all the markings of the final scene of a Hallmark Christmas movie.

I love Hallmark movies. I know they can sometimes be a little sappy and are generally predictable. My kids often referred to them as “Pony Movies” and used to roll their eyes and made fun of me when they were younger and I would get a Hallmark movie for all the family to watch. Despite the initial protests, by the end of the movie, there was seldom a dry eye among any of us. There is a certain comfort in Hallmark movies, knowing that despite all the trials and struggles the main characters might go through in the movie, by the end, everything will work out – the impossible will become possible; good will win out over evil; broken relationships will be restored; love will prevail.

That is not unlike the Christian story. While we don’t know how all the individual chapters in our lives will turn out in this in-between age in which we live, we do know how the story ends. God and His people win! Sin and death are defeated and eternal life awaits all those who are washed in the blood of the lamb. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (Romans 8:18). In the Revelation to John, we are given a glimpse of the new heaven and new earth that are coming: John records, “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then He said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true… It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty, I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my Children.’” (Revelation 21:3-7)

As Christmas approaches, I am reminded of the opening verses of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God…The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1,14).

Before God ever spoke His first recorded words “Let there be light,” plans were already in place for His Son – “The Word” to come into the world. When God first created the world, we are told in Genesis that He pronounced all creation “good.” After creating humankind, God said, “it was very good.” (Genesis 1:31). As we continue reading in Genesis, however, it wasn’t long before all that was “very good” went horribly wrong.
when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, opening the door for sin and death to enter into humanity, threatening to destroy all of creation, unless something was done to conquer the power of sin and death.

Throughout the generations, we have proven over and over again that we are incapable of saving ourselves. It is for that reason and out of God’s love for us that the Messiah, the Word, the Son of God came into the world, to do that which we are incapable of doing ourselves. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16).

The Christmas story and the Easter story are intertwined. Our salvation is dependent upon both: The “Word became flesh” (taking our humanity upon Himself) in order to ultimately cleanse our sin ridden bodies (heart, mind, body and soul) though the shedding of the Blood of the Lamb, poured out on the Cross, where He offered Himself as the “atonning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for our sins but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2).

Dear Friends, in a few days at Christmas, we will be joining with the angels in praising God singing “Glory to God in the highest heaven,” celebrating the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ “the Word became flesh,” followed a few months later by our Easter celebration of Jesus’ death and resurrection and then His ascension back to Heaven where He will remain until His coming again at the end of the age. While Jesus Christ “The Word” has returned to Heaven, before His ascension, He said, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus is with us in the power and presence of His Holy Spirit who lives and dwells within us, but He is also with us in His spoken Word – the Holy Scriptures. The Lord continues to speak to us through His Word – the living Word of God. In the Psalms we read, “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” (Psalm 119:105). In Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy he writes, “All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (II Timothy 3:16-17).

How blessed we are to have a God who loves us beyond our ability to comprehend; a God who was willing to become one of us, taking our flesh upon Himself by being born of the Virgin Mary; a God who was willing to reveal Himself to us through His Son in ways that the prophets of old were unable to do; a God who was willing to die for us on the Cross, offering Himself as an atoning sacrifice for our sins; a God who rose to new life for us, setting us free from the power sin and death, inviting us into that new resurrected life as His children; a God who has not abandoned us when He returned to Heaven, but lives in us through the Holy Spirit; a God who continues to speak to us not only in and through our prayers, but also through His Holy Word – the Bible.

We indeed are a blessed people and have much to celebrate this Christmas. While we don’t always know how every chapter in our earthly lives will turn out, God through His Holy Word has revealed the Good News that awaits those who believe in His Son Jesus Christ – “The Word made flesh” the One who will make all things new – A new heaven and a new earth, where there is no sorrow or death, but life ever-lasting. May you and your loved ones have a very blessed and Merry Christmas, and may God use you to be a blessing to others as you share your faith in “The Word made flesh.” Amen!

Faithfully Your Brother in Christ,

+ Bill
Advent is not just the countdown to Christmas. The lectionary doesn’t even hint at the Christmas narrative until the Fourth Sunday of Advent. This is not simply to raise the sense of anticipation to a fevered pitch for our children - and the child within each of us. The fact is: Advent has its own distinct theme centered on the varied aspects of the adventus or coming of Christ - His Second Coming, His coming at the Word made flesh, and His coming to dwell within each of us in the present time through the Spirit. Hence, while the December soundscape is saturated with the strains of “Frosty the Snowman” (not again!) or the Peanuts Christmas soundtrack (much better!), in church we endure a sense of delayed gratification as the Lectionary confronts us with the Final Judgment, and then devotes two weeks to the preaching of John the Baptist. Finally, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent we get to the immediate backstory of the birth of the Messiah with the message of the Angel.

A person has to have an unusually hardened disposition not to delight in hearing about the wide-eyed resoluteness of the young woman from Nazareth as she encounters the angel and embraces her role in God’s purpose. For Protestants, the story’s ‘fit’ with the season allows us to enjoy keeping company with Mary without compunction -- without the worry that attention to the role of Mary is “too Catholic.” Otherwise, Protestants are more reticent, assuming that veneration of Mary lacks a scriptural basis, deflects our focus from Jesus, and is an intrusion of idolatry into the Christian faith. But is this really true?

**The Theotokos or God-bearer**

Mary became the focus of controversy in the early fifth century during the Nestorian crisis. In Constantinople, the local population had come to refer to Mary as *Theotokos* or ‘the Godbearer.’ Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, objected that Mary is the bearer of Jesus in his humanity, but she does not carry his divinity in her womb. He proposed the title, *Christotokos* (‘bearer of Christ’) to indicate that she is merely the bearer of Christ’s human nature. In 531 the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius as a heretic for dividing Christ into two persons and validated the term, *Theotokos* (also affirmed at Chalcedon in 451 - see page 864 in the *Book of Common Prayer*).

Nestorius’ principle accuser, Cyril of Alexandria, said, “The Holy virgin gave birth in the flesh to God united with the flesh according to hypostasis (= in a single person), for that reason we call her Theotokos... If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is, in truth, God, and therefore that the holy virgin is Theotokos, for she bore in a fleshly manner the Word from God become flesh, let him be anathema.”

To modern people this controversy seems abstruse and confusing. Even scholars question whether Nestorius was guilty of what he was accused, and stress the political factors in the debate between Cyril and Nestorius. The key point for us, however, is that the dispute was really more about Jesus than about Mary. That is, attention to Mary derives not from the influence...
of pagan goddess worship, but from a focus on the union of humanity and divinity in Jesus of Nazareth. Veneration of Mary was historically a safeguard of the biblical proclamation, "the Word made flesh."

The Original Ark

So far as the biblical foundation of singling out Mary is concerned, there is much that one might say. For now, however, let us examine a single theme: Luke’s identification of Mary with the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark of the Covenant was simply a container, a wooden box covered with elaborate gold ornamentation. Inside were the tablets of the Law. But what made the Ark the supremely holy object within Israel is a promise that the LORD makes as He instructs Moses about the specifications for building the ark – and, in particular, its lid, called the “Mercy Seat.”

And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel. (Exodus 25:21-22)

The Ark, as N.T. Wright would say, was the unique “point of intersection between heaven and earth,” the actual manifestation of God’s glory in this world. King Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem to house the Ark, but when it was first constructed, the Ark occupied the Tabernacle, a sacred tent and surrounding enclosure, built by divine command in the Book of Exodus.

Gospel of John tells us that the Word, or Logos, was with God and was God, and then goes on to proclaim that the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14, ESV). The original text does not actually say “dwelt.” The verb comes from ‘skene,’ which means ‘tent’ or ‘tabernacle.’ By telling us that the Eternal Word ‘pitched his tent’ or ‘tabernacled’ among us, John declares that Jesus is none other than the Holy One of Israel who promised to ‘meet with’ his people “from above the Mercy Seat,” that Jesus is Himself the point of intersection between Heaven and Earth!

Mary as the Ark

The earliest Christians took the obvious next step: if Jesus is the one who ‘tabernacles’ among his people, what does this say about the Virgin from Nazareth who carries him in her womb, but that she is the new Ark of the Covenant? Athanasius (296–373), the great defender of the Nicene faith, said this:

“O noble Virgin, truly you are greater than any other greatness. For who is your equal in greatness, O dwelling place of God the Word? To whom among all creatures shall I compare you, O Virgin? You are greater than them all. You are the ark in which is found the golden vessel containing the true manna, that is, the flesh in which divinity resides.”

A century earlier, Gregory the Wonderworker (213-270) urged, “Let us chant the melody that has been taught us by the inspired harp of David, and say, ‘Arise, O Lord, into thy rest; thou, and the ark of thy sanctuary.’ For the Holy Virgin is in truth an ark, wrought with gold both within and without, that has received the whole treasury of the sanctuary.”

Early Christians often made exuberant and highly imaginative comparisons between that Old and New Testaments. In this case, however, Gregory and Athanasius derived this understanding of Mary as the Ark directly from the Gospel of Luke.

The Visitation

On the Fourth Sunday of Advent in Year C, we hear the story of the “Visitation,” how six months into her pregnancy, Mary visits her cousin, Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John
DAVID, THE ARK, AND THE VISITATION

And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim. And they carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart, with the ark of God, and Ahio went before the ark.

And David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the LORD, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. And David was angry because the LORD had broken out against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. And David was afraid of the LORD that day, and he said, “How can the ark of the LORD come to me?” So David was not willing to take the ark of the LORD into the city of David. But David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. And the ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household.

And it was told King David, “The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God.” So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing. And when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six steps, he sacrificed an ox and a fattened animal. And David danced before the LORD with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the horn. (2 Samuel 6:2-15)

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.” (Luke 1:39-45)

And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. (Luke 1:56)
the Baptist. On Mary’s arrival, the infant leaps Elizabeth’s womb and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and cries out,

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”


When you compare the two passages and identify specific phrases that appear in both as in the chart below, the conclusion is inescapable: Luke himself identifies Mary as the New Ark of the Covenant. The point, once again, is to lift up Jesus as the God of Israel now made human and manifest among His people. At no point does Luke suggest that Mary shares in Jesus’ divinity; Mary is not the “Divine Feminine” or the “Female face of God.” Yet, just as the Ark is the instrumentality, the actual means by which Israel encounters the LORD, so Mary is the instrumentality by which the Incarnation happens in time and space. Just the Ark -- a mere earthly artifact -- is the point where Heaven and Earth intersect, and thus, the holiest object in creation, so Mary is uniquely holy and worthy of honor.

If this is true, our Protestant scruples may be misplaced, and we can, without compunction, join with Elizabeth as she says, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

The Rev. Dr. Brown is Rector of Trinity Church, Potsdam, and a regular contributor to The Albany Episcopalian
From the Editor...

Each Christmas season, Christians around the world bring out their long-awaited displays of wreaths, Christmas trees, boughs of holly and brilliant red or white poinsettias. Accompanied by bright and colorful lights and various other decorations, it is all done to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

At the same time, the tradition of celebrating this Holy and festive period can be seen in churches of all Christian faiths - and the Diocese of Albany is no exception. Each year, parishes decorate their buildings in different ways in order to make their Christmas “event” unique and welcoming to all who enter their houses of worship during this joyous season.

For the past few years, many parishes of the Diocese submitted photos of their efforts for possible publication in The Albany Episcopalian Christmas issue. Here are some samples of the very best that have been received. In alphabetical order by city/town they are: Cathedral of All Saints, Albany, St. Paul’s, Albany, St. Peter’s, Albany, St. George’s, Clifton Park, St. John’s, Cohoes, Christ Church, Cooperstown, Christ Church, Duanesburg, Christ Church, Gilbertsville, St. Paul’s, Greenwich, St. Philip’s, Norwood, Trinity Church, Potsdam, Bethesda, Saratoga, St. George’s, Schenectady, and Church of the Cross, Ticonderoga.

Special thanks to all the parishes that have sent us photos and allowed us to share these precious scenes with the readers of The Albany Episcopalian. May we wish everyone a very blessed Christmas!
St. Peter’s, Albany
St. Paul’s, Bloomville
St. Phillip’s, Norwood
St. George’s, Clifton Park
St. Phillip’s, Norwood
The seasons of Advent and Christmas are very special seasons that Christians set aside as a time of transition. During this season, we remember that the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would conceive and bear a Son. We recall that this young mother-to-be was puzzled as to how this could be. Talk about a time of transition! Here she was, a young woman, betrothed and not married, told she would conceive and bare a child. In first century Palestine, this could have been a devastating transition. However, we know that by being faithful to God and God’s will - Mary found a better way. She responded to God’s calling saying, “Let it be to me according to your word.” Through this humble act of submission to God and God’s will, Mary became the Theotokos, the God-bearer. Talk about transition!

Joseph and Mary had to make another transition and travel to Bethlehem, Joseph’s ancestral home, to comply with the census registering all citizens ordered by Emperor Augustus. Then came the most amazing transition of all time!!! God came down from heaven – as we recall each week in the Nicene Creed - “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” Emmanuel, “God is with us.” An inn keeper ‘transitioned’ a feeding trough, to serve as a make-do crib. What about the poor shepherds in the fields? According to the Gospel of Luke (2:8–14), angels appeared at night to a group of shepherds. The shepherds were people out working and minding their own business when their lives suddenly turned upside down. They were terrified by a mighty encounter in their transition to become important early witnesses to the birth of Jesus.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that there were more transitions to come. Joseph was warned that the worst of their journey was ahead of them not behind them. Joseph was told in a dream that Jesus’ life was in jeopardy. This led them on a difficult and challenging trip to Egypt for safety necessitating yet another transition. Even for Jesus, the journey is a journey of transitions.

Throughout life, we are in transition. Birth, death and all the seasons in-between are times of transition. The Church has a liturgical year through which we transition from season to season. We are now in the liturgical season of Advent - the period of “already and not yet.” This is a time when we prepare to celebrate the greatest gift that we will ever receive, Jesus Christ. Through him, we receive God’s unconditional love, mercy, grace, and the peace that goes beyond understanding. Through him, we receive the promise of salvation and eternal life. It is “already and not yet” because God has come down from heaven to live among us while we wait in eager anticipation for the time when he will come again. Advent is special time of preparation reminding us to prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus the Messiah.
As we prepare our hearts to receive Jesus, we are making a transition from spiritual death into the fullness of what a life in Christ brings. The Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans “we have been buried with him (Christ) by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). When we live earthly lives preparing for eternal lives we are laying the foundation for the greatest transition that we will ever experience.

Consider carefully the gifts you are blessed to share this Christmas. As I walk about, often feeling bombarded by ads, sales and specials, I am reminded of the fourth verse of one of my favorite Christmas hymns, In the Bleak Midwinter:

*What can I give Him, Poor as I am?*
*If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb;*
*If I were a wise man I would do my part, Yet what I can I give Him Give my heart.*

As you embrace the Christian journey with heart, soul, mind, and strength, know that you are in the process of a transition that goes beyond understanding. We are transitioning into more nearly reflecting the image and likeness of God, in whose image we are created. We are all in some season of transition, hopefully being renewed daily by the Holy Spirit as we hear in the words of the following Christmas collect:

Almighty God, you have given us your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

For our parishes in transition, this can be an especially exciting, challenging and maybe even anxious time. For them and for all of us, may these seasons of Advent and Christmas be a time of renewal in the Holy Spirit. I love the words of the prophet when he wrote, “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

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Come to the Table

Rev Patti Johnson has been a good friend to CMS Ireland for many years. She is a priest from Albany Diocese, USA, and also chair of the Diocesan Mission Committee. She has visited South Sudan and Ireland on several occasions and on her most recent trip she took part in our Ignite Conference. After the conference, Patti travelled on to South Sudan to visit partners in Maridi Diocese. Here now are some reflections of her visit.

“Come to the table of mercy, prepared with the wine and the bread; All who are hungry and thirsty, come and your souls will be fed. Come at the Lord’s invitation; received from His nail-scarred hand. Eat of the bread of salvation; drink of the blood of the Lamb.”

[Cloninger/Nystrom]

Over the course of 14 days, I traveled to and through 7 countries on 3 continents. USA, Canada, Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. I pulled my chair up to many tables and enjoyed fine food and deep fellowship with my global family. The experience has definitely expanded my palate – I’ve enjoyed Irish Stew with wheaten bread, and stewed cassava leaves and peanut paste with kisra. But more importantly, these hours spent with friends and family around their tables has expanded my appreciation of the various cultures within the body of Christ.

My journey began in Northern Ireland at CMSI’s Ignite conference. Joining friends for international fellowship at Ignite is always a joy, whether competing in an uproarious game of Beetle Drive, or reverently sharing Holy Communion. God adds to my global family at each conference – another friendship made, another member of the family.

On the Sunday following Ignite, I attended the dedication of baby Joshua, the newest member of my friend’s family. The pastor preached about eight tables at which we are invited into the Lord’s presence: The tables of Grace, Forgiveness, Acceptance and Belonging, Comfort, Healing, Celebration, Victory and Power, and Intimacy. I was uplifted and edified by the message, and quickly pulled out my iPhone to take notes. I am so glad I did, as it helped me to perceive the tables at which I sat over the following eight days.

I pulled my chair up to the table of Grace, in the home of a long-time friend in Maridi, South Sudan. I have often told him that his family is larger than my home church congregation. The number of people around his table has grown over time, through joy and through tragedy. All of these children are now his. God has placed them in his tender care, and he offers all he has to the Lord in return.

There were fewer of us at the table of Forgiveness. Just three humbled people, and a light breakfast of eggs, bread, honey, and bananas. An apology for harsh words and attitude was offered, and quickly accepted. When God forgives our sins and offenses, how can we not extend that forgiveness to others?
The table of Acceptance and Belonging was set in Juba, South Sudan in the home of a beloved friend. God brought us together on two occasions in the US, but this was our first meal together in his country, in his home. The feast was abundant and flavourful; very much a taste of South Sudan. Superficial distinctions of language, skin tone, gender, and dining customs were not divisive – I knew I was accepted as a sister in Christ, as a member of his family.

The guest tukul in Maridi housed the table of Comfort. Morning and evening we sat together and prayed over the gifts of food we were blessed to receive, and the challenges faced by our family there. Comfort in such a situation is found only in Christ, and in knowing and believing that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose.

The table of Healing was spread at the home of the Archbishop and Primate of South Sudan. We shared a light meal and a heavy conversation. I poured out my heart and my tears, revealed my doubts and my fears. He quietly listened, then offered words of healing. Wholeness was restored, in Christ.

The table of Celebration was surrounded by family and friends in Northern Ireland, the day Joshua was dedicated to the Lord. Friends and relatives of all ages filled the rooms of the house with joy and laughter. Joshua is a member of a large, loving family which will expand exponentially over the coming years as he grows in the Lord.

Over 1,500 gathered at the table of Victory and Power in All Saints Cathedral in Juba on Sunday’s 9 am service. Men, women, and children of all ages joined to praise and worship God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Word of God was read, preached, heard, and received; God’s Word and Holy Communion together strengthen and empower the people to live the life to which God calls them. Lives of victory over sin and death; lives lived in the Power of the Holy Spirit, enabling each one to be a light in the darkness of violence, war, and extreme need.

Of all the tables to which I was invited over these eight days, none was more precious than the table of Intimacy. Three times a day the people of the household gathered to pray and eat, to talk and to share the everyday life in the service of God. The conversations were informal and relaxed. I asked a thousand questions about life in South Sudan, about the church, and about individual life experiences. I wanted to understand every little detail and nuance of relationships in the lives of these cherished brothers and sisters in Christ. Their humble and honest responses gave me new insight into how they came to be people of deep faith, personal sacrifice, and incredible resilience; and how this is lived out in daily life in South Sudan.

I am deeply appreciative of the generous hospitality extended by my global family. I thank my God every time I remember them. In all my prayers for all of them, I always pray with joy… and I thank God for inviting me to Come to the Table.

Shukuru Yesu and Amen

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Rev. Patti Johnson is Priest-in-Charge, St. James’, AuSable Forks, and Chair of the Albany Diocese Mission Committee
can think of no better time to talk about prayer then at Christmas. Now prayer has been around since God created the earth and mankind. Christian Prayer however, started on the very night our Lord Jesus Christ, The Christ child, was born. This babe was born into this world as an answer to prayers offered up by the people of Israel, the Jewish people, who God loved so very much, even though time and time again they had chosen to turn away from Him. Once more, in desperation they turned to Him in prayer, asking for forgiveness and praying for a savior to be sent by God to them, a Messiah. They were looking for a leader, a man fully grown to lead them into battle against their oppressors, The Roman Empire. They had no idea that God would answer their prayers with the birth of a babe in a stable. God moves in ways that we don’t always understand, and He answers our prayers in subtle almost unnoticed ways. His time is not our time, and far too often we give up on our prayers thinking He doesn’t hear, or in some cases, sadly that He doesn’t even exist.

Saint Augustine once said; If God seems slow in responding, it is because He is preparing a better gift. He will not deny us. God withholds what you are not yet ready for. He wants you to have a lively desire for His greatest gifts. All of which is to say, pray always and do not lose heart.

On the night that our Lord was born, so was the birth of our Christian Faith, for God opened up a door between heaven and earth. He himself stepped through, coming down from Heaven in the second form of God in the most Holy Trinity, the Son, so that He could be as one of us, sharing all that we feel - the good, the bad, and sadly, the ugly. He saw and experienced all this so that He might understand and love even more this broken people He created from the offspring of Adam and Eve.

From the very beginning of His life on earth our Lord experienced it all; the love of His parents, the awe and love of the lowly Shepherds who came and knelt down at the sight of this new babe; the Wise men from the east who came to see the birth of the new King; even the horrible execution of the innocent, and the fleeing with His Mother and Father into Egypt from King Herod who wanted to take his life.

Now this gives us a little understanding of our Lord’s first years on earth and the birth of our Christian Faith. Let us now look at our Lord Jesus in His years as a young man. One thing you will find in the reading of The New Testament is that Jesus is continually found in prayer to our Heavenly Father, especially finding him in prayer at times when something very important was about to happen in his life and in the lives of his followers. This fact was not lost with our Lord’s Disciples. It is written in the Bible that the Disciples came to Jesus, asking him to teach them to pray. It came to be known as The Lord’s Prayer.
We all know the words of the prayer and we can say them without even thinking. Unfortunately, that’s exactly what many Christians do. We should take the time and digest what Jesus is teaching His Disciples - and us, in how to pray. The very first words, Our Father in Heaven, is an acknowledgement of God in Heaven being the creator of all. Second– Give us this day our daily bread. For most of us we simply cannot know the weight of this request that is being made. People of this time, especially those who have left their jobs and families to follow Jesus, are praying for enough food to see them through that very day, nothing extra or elaborate, but simply enough to get through until the next day starts. Third, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. In other words, Father, we have not wronged anyone this day to the best of our knowledge, but if we have, may they and you dear Father forgive us. Fourthly, lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil. This seems to be the hardest of all for us, perhaps even more now than then. In other words, Father steer us away from temptations; the things that will harm us not only in our beliefs and faith, but also harm us physically. Deliver us from evil, in other words, dear Father, keep us on the right pathway, living our lives in a way that is pleasing to you. Fifth, For thine is the Kingdom and the Glory, forever and ever. We then realize that we and everything that is in heaven and on earth belongs to our Father, including us, and we give thanks to you for all.

This is an example on how we should pray. It’s not that hard, God doesn’t want it to be. Yet, when I ask people what they pray, many might tell me they pray “Now I lay me down to sleep”. This is good for a parent to teach a child about prayer and that they need not be afraid, but for an adult, it seems that something is missing, that the true meaning of prayer has been lost, or what about those who pray, The Lord’s Prayer. I applaud you for doing so. It is a wonderful prayer that we use during our church services, but if you don’t truly feel the words and meaning what is in your heart, are they doing what our Lord wishes to accomplish for us?

The prayer given to our Lord’s Disciples was an example for them to follow; a way for them to place before God their needs, their desires, and to give thanks to God for all that he had given. God doesn’t need or want us to pray in a certain “cookie cutter” way or form, cut and dry with no variation. Prayer is the most important tool, a weapon given to us by God. It is a way, perhaps the best way, for each of us to communicate with God, to let him know what is truly on your heart and what is in your mind and lying upon your soul.

There are no special words that need to be said. It can be as simple as saying, Father I need you - simple and to the point. Or, it can be something lengthier, where you pour out your problems in great detail to our Lord. Or, we might ask for healing of our selves or someone we love, or even for the healing of our Church and the World. God is there to hear it all, even the terrible mistakes we have made, and “Yes”, he is there to forgive you, your sins, as long as you are truly sorry and ask with a penitent heart.

God does hear your prayers and he does move on each and every one of them. He may not move at the speed that you feel he should or in the direction that you feel would be best. It’s even OK to get angry with God. He can take it. After all, he’s been watching over us for a long-long-long time.

Never give up on your prayers, and never think that saying a prayer one time is simply enough. God wishes us to know that your prayers are important to you and that He is important to you as well. As for prayers that are answered with miracles, they do happen. I have seen them in my own answered prayers. Many others attest to this as well. None are as large or as important as the first miracle of the birth of our Lord and Savior, yet miracles do happen. Never give up or give in, but be prayerful in all things both big and small.

Ask others to pray for your needs as well, praying in private in that special place where you can have that one-on-one conversation with God. It is very special and can bring clarity to your life. Praying with others can give you a warm and special feeling in knowing that there are others, fellow Christians, who care for you and your needs and who share your faith in God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Know that He is always there by your side and does walk the path of life with you. Sometimes, when we fall from the path; perhaps he is seeing if we have been listening to his teachings. One thing I know for sure is that he will always offer his hand out in love and support, picking you up and saying I will never leave you alone or let Satan steal you away. You simply need Faith, a Christ-filled faith, and your prayers will be answered. Amen.

In Prayer and Christ Filled Faith,
Fr. Greg Bailey
CLERGY IN TRANSITION

Appointments

The Rev. Judith Malionek - has been called to serve as Rector at St. John’s, Troy

The Rev. Carolyn Bartkus - has been called to serve as Priest in Charge at St. John’s, Ogdensburg.

The Rev. Canon Robert F. Haskell - has been called to serve as Rector at Church of the Redeemer, Rensselaer.

The Rev. Sonya Anna Boyce - has been called to serve as Rector at St. John’s, Massena.

Deacon Sandra McGowan - has been appointed to serve at the Cathedral of All Saints in Albany.

Deacon Helen Harris - has been appointed to serve at Zion Church, Colton.

Departures

The Rev. Mary White - has resigned as Rector of St. Andrew’s, Albany. She is working in the Diocese of Vermont.

The Rev. Sally Heiligman - has retired from Grace, Mohawk.

In Memoriam

The Rev. Rob Gerber - died on August 19, 2019. Fr. Gerber served the diocese briefly as Priest in Charge at St. John’s, Troy, from May 1976-September 1977 and as Rector of Grace and Holy Innocents, Albany, from October 1977 until 1993. He also assisted at St. Andrew’s Church, Albany, while working in the community.


SAVE THE DATE!

2020 Parish Leadership Conferences

Mark your calendar for the 2020 Diocesan Parish Leadership Conferences which will focus on how your parish can use the Alpha Course as an evangelistic tool. The course seeks to introduce the basics of the Christian faith through a series of talks and discussions and is described by its organizers as “an opportunity to explore the meaning of life”.

More information regarding the conferences will be released soon. Plan to attend one of three opportunities around the diocese.

March 7, 2020 – North country location TBD

March 21, 2020 – Christ the King Center, Greenwich

March 28, 2020 – St. James’ Church, Oneonta
At this holiest of seasons, giving to poor children seems to be a perfect way to celebrate Jesus’ birth! Our Lord slept in a manger for lack of a bed, and today, thousands of children are sleeping on floors for the same reason. We have an opportunity to make a difference through the Sleep In Heavenly Peace project.

SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE is a wonderful, national, not-for profit organization whose sole purpose is to build beds for children who have no bed (toddlers to teens). Their motto is “no kid sleeps on the floor in our town.” SHP volunteers arrive at a “building site”, bringing all the tools and supplies with them to fabricate twin sized beds that can also be turned into bunk beds.

There’s a hymn titled, “CHRIST HAS NO BODY NOW BUT YOURS…. no hands, no feet on earth, but yours.” The words took on a special meaning for our group this Fall as we gathered at Christ the King Center to build beds for children who had been sleeping on floors. About thirty of us, all ages and denominations, gathered to do the Lord’s work to minister to His children.

Our “crew” was comprised of a priest, a nun from the Community of St. Mary, several parishioners, children, neighbors and their families; also one teen aged boy who had received a bed from Sleep in Heavenly Peace, who now wanted to give back. This is how it all came about:

Our daughter Beth is a volunteer with SHP and got us interested in sponsoring a “build” at Christ the King Spiritual Life Center. The cost to sponsor a “build” is $1,700 which pays for the lumber, mattresses and bedding. Since the host of the “build” is responsible for purchasing the lumber, mattresses and bedding, it was important that we not create any financial burden to Christ the King. As it turned out, when doing The Lord’s work, He makes a way. Fr. Dave Haig and I began chatting about the situation, and he said “Judy, you must know seventeen people who will give you $100. I’ll tell you what, you get the first ten $100 donations, and I’ll give you the 11th!” With that challenge, how could we fail? Posting what we were doing on Face Book and sending a letter to a few folks not on social media, we were blessed to collect $2,450. Fr. Dave was a man of his word and came to Christ the King to deliver his check and give me a congratulatory hug. He came to ours then sponsored his own “build” at St. Luke’s on the Hill, Mechanicville!

Each child gets a new bed, mattress, pillow, sheets and a comforter free of charge. The SHP team delivers the bed to the child’s home and assembles it. The kid gets the opportunity to help put the bed together and is then asked to step out of the room so that he/she can have a big “reveal.” The team makes the bed, always with a special comforter, then brings the child back to see his/her new bed. The experience of witnessing the “unveiling” is always a joyous occasion both for the child and the team.

On September 7th, Christ the King Center sponsored a “build, supplied the finances, selected a location, then workers spent a wonderful few hours building seventeen beds. CtK provided donuts and coffee in the morning, then pizza and soda in the afternoon. Knowing that seventeen children would now have their very own bed warmed our hearts. It was great fun for all.

It was most gratifying to be part of this project. I encourage you to take a moment and “Google” Sleep in Heavenly Peace, as their website provides tons of information on the project. Learn how to request a bed for a child, be a volunteer at a “build” or donate to this cause. Donate a pillow, a bed in a bag, an entire bunkbed or have your own “build” like we did. Listen to that “still small voice” that speaks to you, and, for His sake, respond!
THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

“The Twelve Days of Christmas,” has several interpretations of its lyrics. Here is one favorite…

My true love .............................. God, and the gifts from God

The partridge .............................. Jesus

Two turtledoves ......................... The Old and New Testaments

Three French hens ...................... Faith, Hope and Charity

Four calling birds ....................... The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

Five golden rings ....................... The Torah (The first five books of the Bible): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy

Six geese a-laying ...................... The six days of Creation (Genesis)

Seven swans a-swimming ............. The Seven Sacraments: Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders and Anointing the Sick

Eight maids a-milking ................. The eight Beatitudes in Sermon on the Mount - Blessed are: the poor in spirit; those who mourn; the meek; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peace makers and the persecuted for the sake of righteousness. (Matthew 5:3-10)


Ten Lords a-leaping .................... The Ten Commandments

Eleven pipers piping .................. The Apostles (not including Judas) who spread the Good News

Twelve drummers drumming .......... The Twelve Articles of Faith in the Apostles’ Creed: “We believe… in God the Father; Creator; God the Son; Crucified, died, buried; raised from the dead; ascended into heaven; God the Holy Spirit; the holy catholic Church; communion of saints; forgiveness of sins; resurrection of the body; and life everlasting.”
Merry Christmas From

Beaver Cross Ministries

Registration for Summer Camp 2020 Opens January 1, 2020!

Give a Child the Gift of Christian Community

Contact us | Director: Daniel Hyde
(518) 692-9550 Ex. 114
www.beavercrossministries.org
#beavercrosscamp
Come to A Diocesan Youth Group!

**WHAT:** A YOUTH GROUP FOR ANYONE!
**WHERE:** ST. GEORGE’S (912 RT. 146, CLIFTON PARK, NEW YORK 12065)
**WHEN:** EVERY TUESDAY 6:15 P.M. – 7:30 P.M.
**WHO:** 5TH-8TH GRADERS

**WHAT:** A YOUTH GROUP FOR ANYONE!
**WHERE:** ST. JOHN’S (146 1ST STREET TROY, NY 12180)
**WHEN:** EVERY THURSDAY 6:45 P.M. – 8:00 P.M.
**WHO:** 7TH-12TH GRADE

Free Weekly Events
Beaver Cross Summer Camps
Grades K-12

Volunteer Day - Pack Camp Away

Jr. & Sr. Fall Edition  ||  Oct. 11th-14th

Cathedral Lock-In  ||  Dec. 13th
Grades 7-12

Summer Camp Registration Opens

Jr. & Sr. Sonshine  ||  Feb. 14th-17th
Grades 3-12

Spring Break Camp  ||  April 13th-17th
Grades K-8

Volunteer Day - Set Up

Diocesan Convention  ||  June 5th-7th
All Ages

See You Soon!
The Diocese of Albany is One Church fulfilling the Great Commandment and Great Commission, moving from membership to discipleship; equipping, emboldening and sending disciples to make disciples.

- Diocesan Vision

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Diocesan Website
For the most up-to-date information about events in the diocese, parish and clergy directories, mission news, parish resources, and more, visit the diocesan website at www.albanyepiscopaldiocese.org. You can also visit us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/albanydiocese.

BISHOP LOVE’S VISITATION SCHEDULE

May
  5  Trinity Church, Plattsburgh
  12 St. Paul’s Church, Salem

February
  2  St. Stephen’s Church, Schuylerville
  9  Church of the Messiah, Glens Falls

March
  1  Christ Church, Herkimer
  8  Grace Church, Mohawk
  22 St. Mark’s Church, Philmont
  29 Trinity Church, Whitehall

April
  5  Trinity Church, Watervliet
  26 St. Stephen’s Church, Delmar