

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
Advent 2
December 5, 2021

The Everyday and the Eternal

Baruch 5:1-9; Canticle 16 (Luke 1:68-79)
Philippians 1:3-11; ; Luke 3:1-6

If you're like me, the start of each morning begins with a blast of email. I must get a hundred or so a day. Many are from political candidates asking for money. But in this season, a lot are from merchants wanting to sell me something for the "holidays."

Many begin with announcements of discount. All in 60-point font size blasting incredible savings.

"Twenty-five percent off – CYBER MONDAY!" one from a clothing outfit. "All shirts – Holiday Gift Sale – Shop Sale. Such a deal. I'm here to tell you!

As if I needed another shirt. Maybe another book, but definitely not a shirt.

A little further down on the list of e-mails was my newsletter from the gas industry folks in West Virginia. What caught my attention was an article on a property tax debacle roiling state politics.

Apparently, property taxes had been calculated at the state level. Then the state senate decided that they didn't like the compromise the taxation committee had worked out. The tax bill was then kicked over to a regulatory tax board. But key stakeholders, like county assessors, mayors and property owners were left out of that discussion. The upshot is that instead of sugarplum fairies and Ole St. Nick, West Virginia politicians will delight in redoing their tax bill for Christmas. Joy to the World, right!?

In fact, this IS the way to begin Christmas. At least, it's how Luke begins it.

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee..."

Let's stop right there. Herod the Great had exacted ruinous taxes from the people who made the economy, the farmers and fishermen. His sons continued this predatory tax scheme. Along with whatever else they could grift off the take. The others, all the way up the chain to the Emperor Tiberius and the rest of the crooks took their cut.

Where are the Tea Partiers when you need them? TEA – you get it -- Taxed Enough Already (except for the ginormous break the top 1% got). Jews of Judea and Galilee really had a legitimate beef about the swampy muck of imperial rule in that despotic age. Definitely, no 25% off from Pontius Pilate on your tax bill. As hotel heiress Leona Hemsley says, "Taxes are for the Little People." So, pay up or sold in to slavery you'll be.

Nothing's new under the sun.

It is into this cesspool of corruption, into this everyday grift, that God intrudes with a message sublime, a message of graciousness.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Strike up the choir and SING IT, G.F. Handel!

And it's still about the taxes and all the other stuff -- folks barely making it -- through which we must seek out God's arrival in our time. The troubles of yesterday will be the troubles of our day.

The other day someone took issue with my comment that a major part of the problem with COVID-19 was "magical theology." It's people thinking God will ward off the disease without a jab. No need for masks or any of that other stuff. God will take care of it. In the temptations of Jesus, we're warned not to put God to the test. The response was that the appearance of Jesus Christ in a manger was pretty "magical."

No, it wasn't. That's incarnational theology. God making an appearance in human flesh through human agency. Mary was a willing cooperator with God in this birth. Joseph, who helped raise up Jesus, was another. This is incarnation. Not "magic." This is human agency bent to a new future through the apprehension of the Holy Spirit.

We have the promise of every mountain being leveled and every valley being lifted up. That happens because a lot of folks are doing some heavy lifting. Spirit inspired lifting.

Israel's return from exile in 538 BCE, which gave rise to Isaiah's marvelous poetry (which Luke reprises). Let's not forget that it was one outside the community of faith who was instrumental – God's agent. Cyrus of Persia was designated as Messiah in the Hebrew Bible as a result of his role. Incarnation. The Spirit speaks to all flesh. He was part of the valley lifting operation.

This Advent as Handel's wonderful choruses ring through my thoughts, other valley-lifting operations come to mind.

The Innocence Project out of the Cardozo Law School in New York. The heavy valley-lifting was done by Professor Barry Scheck who founded the Innocence Project using the new science of DNA. Incarnation, I tell you.

Here's the story of their latest victory. And do we ever celebrate this incremental victory! There are now Innocence Project teams using this technology all across the country. Out of the Kansas City-based Midwest Innocence Project the conviction of Kevin Strickland was reversed.

Kevin has been incarcerated for forty-three years, serving a 50-year sentence, the longest wrongful imprisonment in the history of Missouri.

In his trial, the prosecution had no physical evidence for the triple murder of which Kevin was convicted. Years later, the two men who did the crime confessed their guilt. A fourth person who survived the shooting later, after police coaching, had identified Kevin as the shooter, but later recanted her testimony.

In addition to the Innocence Project folks, another heavy-lifter was the new prosecutor Jean Baker, who moved heaven and earth to have the conviction vacated, as the fingerprints on the gun didn't match Strickland's. He was home watching TV during all this.

There's another heavy-lifter – the judge, James Walsh who was willing to look at the evidence and exonerate Kevin Strickland. This in spite of overwhelming political pressure to let matters lie. None of this is "magic."

Unfortunately, under Missouri law, unlike in most states, there are no provisions for making someone whole who has had most of their life stolen from them by the state. No compensation whatsoever. Not a dime! Just shoved out on the street to become another of the countless homeless.

Judge Walsh fought the opposition of some seemingly overwhelming political forces in Missouri to free Kevin, but free he is.

"Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt fought efforts led by Jackson County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker and other legal and political leaders to free

Strickland. Schmitt, a Republican running for the U.S. Senate, said Strickland was guilty. Gov. Mike Parson declined Strickland's clemency requests."¹

But, free at last. Thank God Almighty, free at last. After forty-three years stolen from him.

~~Unfortunately, under Missouri law, unlike in most states, there are no provisions for making someone whole who has had most of their life stolen from them by the state. No compensation whatsoever. Not a dime! Just shoved out on the street to become another of the countless homeless.~~

But, wait. There's more.

Innocence Project attorney Tricia Bushnell created a GoFundMe page to raise money for Kevin's needs – housing, food, clothing and incidentals.² This would be some compensation for his sustenance in a world he knows little about. She writes:

"Mr. Strickland needs financial support to care for his basic needs upon his release from prison. Mr. Strickland has suffered an unimaginable atrocity and no one helped him. Today, he needs your help."³ Heavy lifting, indeed on a very low valley.

Finally, arrives the rest of the crew. As of the end of November this year, over 31,400 heavy valley-lifters had contributed over \$1.7 million as of the end of November. Yes, I sent mine in. You, too, can at:

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-kevin-strickland-after-wrongful-conviction/donations>

"All funds go directly to Mr. Strickland, who the state of Missouri won't provide a dime to for the 43 years they stole from him," Bushnell wrote.

None of this was "magic." All inspired by our "better angels" for the flourishing of our people, especially for the flourishing of Kevin in his new life.

"I didn't think this day would ever come." Kevin's "still in disbelief."⁴

¹ Unsigned, The Associated Press, Chicago Sun Times, November 23, 2021.

² Disha Kandpal, "GoFundMe: How to Help Kevin Strickland, Missouri Man Freed from Prison, HITC, November 24, 2001.

³ Op cit.

⁴ Op cit.

Yes, God's righteous will is that all should participate in this enfleshed abundance. It's sacramental. Remember that sacraments are physical manifestations of inward spiritual realities.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

The one bit of heavy valley-lifting that will help turn on your Advent light is the new movie about Venus and Serena Williams and their family, "King Richard." It is an unfiltered portrayal of growing up in a bad Compton neighborhood filled with gangs, drugs and hookers.

In spite of all that, the faith values of that family prevailed and they raised successful kids. Richard's transformation from a control freak with a plan to a dad willing to turn loose of the reins at the critical moment is a three Kleenex vignette. Go see it. It's Christmas come early.

Jai only had to do a little prompting to get me there. Afterwards I admitted to her that I needed to listen more carefully to her film advice. Go see it. It is good Advent preparation. Chock-a-block full of the Holy Spirit. Valleys were indeed raised up.

We light Advent candles – to proclaim that in the physicality of this world, the inner Light which we seek is present. This week let us pray for hearts of justice; for only with justice comes peace. Might such hearts be a fitting manger for the Prince of Peace. Amen.