

Christmas Eve December 24 2020

One of the real blessings of living in Barre is the Cow Pasture. A lovely little parcel of woods and fields, meadows and streams, filled with spring flowers, fall colors or a crisp winter snow, it is a true refuge and sanctuary, a “go to” place whenever I need just to talk a walk to clear my head. And of course, Zadie, my dog just thinks it is heaven on earth. Walking in the Cow Pasture the other day I spoke with another dog walker I see there on a pretty regular basis, and reflecting on the year we have been through, Fabio said that he hopes at least that some of the things we have learned in this pandemic year are lessons we will take forward into the time when the pandemic is finally done with and we all can get back to a new normal for our lives. I appreciated his thoughts, because it echos some of what I have reflected on in the past few weeks. We have of course entered into the long, dark winter as Dr. Anthony Fauci has said, but in this time, there is also the beginning of hope. Yes, the pandemic rages on, and yes, death toll and the economic devastation continue at rates unseen in our lifetimes. The continued political chaos seems to have taken away any hope of relief in the near term, and this pandemic, as we are all aware, have laid bare the inequalities and racial inequities of our society, with two more unarmed black men killed by the police in Columbus, Ohio in just the past two weeks. But despite this, there is a sense of hope that e are coming to the fist feeble beginnings of the end of the pandemic and a sense that there are changes coming which will help us to live more fully in the future. Yes, yes, my sisters and brothers, we are in the midst of a long, dark winter, but a ray of light is dawning on the horizon.

Prayer: O most merciful and glorious God, on this Holy Night we gather to celebrate the coming of the Savior, God with us, Emmanuel, born for us this night. May we hear the Word of Jesus’ birth and in that word find our hope; this we ask in the Name of Jesus our Savior and friend. Amen.

Well, like everything else this year, our Christmas Eve celebration is certainly different! Once again we gather virtually, but tonight, this Holy Night, we also once again will join together in our prayers with Holy communion. Even though we are each in our own homes we are also united in Spirit as we share together in Eucharist, sharing the bread and wine blessed on our Altar at Good Shepherd, a unity of faith and fellowship. And in a few moments, when we take this communion together, we will dim the lights in our homes and light a candle and sing “Silent Night” together. While we will miss the beauty of having our lovely sanctuary lit by all the candles, I think that this year having each of our homes lit by our candles,

having that light shine out not within the Church walls, but from places all over our community, from places literally this Holy Night from all over the world. I believe that is the reason that what we do this night, gathering together even online since we cannot gather as we did before, gathering as Good Shepherd as Christians far and near also gather together in prayer, gathering throughout our Green Mountain State as the Episcopal Churches in Vermont, gathering to give God thanks for the birth of the Savior and for the light coming into our world.

I believe, my sisters and brothers, that our gathering together, our shining a light, lighting a candle where we dwell, is the way for us to celebrate and share our hope this year. Yes, as I mentioned, it has been a difficult year and yes, we are still in the midst of the long, dark winter of the pandemic, but our gathering this year is a sign of hope for our world. In the most unexpected and unlooked for manner, in a fashion that seems contrary to anything we could possibly imagine, God is present with us. As Luke's Gospel proclaims, lying in a manger, surrounded by the animals in the stable, the hope for the world, the hope for humanity comes to us. Lit up by the glory of an angelic host singing God's praise, visited by the shepherds coming to look for relief for their lives and for their families, here we find in the most unexpected way the hope for our world. Yes, in the the midst of this long, dark winter, a small voice sounds out, in the quiet of a cold, chilly evening, a familiar tune, seemingly overturned by the noise of political chaos and racial strife, a small voice sounds out. Quiet, listen, silent night, holy night, all is clam, all is bright...In that silence, our hope is born...in that silence God's love comes to us, in that silence God's love bears us up, moving us into a future and bidding us to live fully in this love, to follow in the light of this child given for us, to fully embody this divine grace in our lives and to be the light for others. Starting in each of our homes, allowing the light of God's love to lift us up even in the midst of having to be apart for a time, this is our hope for the time to come. As our spiritual ancestors in times past, As Christians have from times long gone, this Holy Night fills us with hope as we raise our voices in praise for God's presence with us, a presence to bear us up even in the midst of most difficult times. This hope, our hope, comes to us this Holy Night in the form of the new born Christ child in Bethlehem.

Of course, when the light dawns tomorrow, we will still live in the midst of a long, dark winter, and the hope we might feel this evening in the candle light and in the melody of *Silent Night*, that hope might seem feeble and fading. God's promise, God's word to us this night is a word hear in years past, and a word that grows in our lives as well: just as all were amazed at the glad tidings they heard on that first

Christmas night, Mary treasured and pondered this in her heart, knowing that God's love will grow in this world, that a feeble flame will shine brighter, that this love will grow in our hearts and in our world. Just as God reaches out to us this Holy Night, reaches out to us to show us the power of God's love becoming fully like us, fully human, that we might know the fulness of God's love supreme. As we live in the fulness of this love, through the long, dark winter we face, the hope that love bringing to us grows as we bring that love to others, seeking God's justice and ease in our lives and in our world, helping to overcome the inequalities and the racial inequities this pandemic exposed for all to see, as we share God's love born in our midst this night, share with others the hope God brings to us, the love grows deeper and stronger, deep roots to make this hope shine ever brighter in our world. This Christmas might well, actually should!, lack some of the festiveness of years past; this Christmas we cannot gather as we are accustomed; this Christmas we Zoom in once again, but the hope we share, the hope Christmas brings us in the love of God given to us in the new born Christ child, this Christmas hope is no less, not dimmed by the pandemic, but still come to bring us hope and life, still come to e God's love present with us, a love and hope to bear us up and to burn ever brighter in the days to come. May we all open our hearts this Christmas, open our hearts to the depth of God's gracious love and to the hope born for us this Holy Night. And as the angel chorus sang those many years ago, a word of hope for those days, and a word of hope for you and me in our day as well, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace and goodwill to all." A Merry and Blessed Christmas to you all! Amen.