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Dear Friends,

Near the end of the baptismal liturgy there is a wonderful prayer for the one who has just been baptized. It concludes with this sentence:

Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.

If it were in our power to confer a brief collection of blessings on a young person to guide them into a whole and holy life, it would be difficult to improve on this list. But perhaps to give, and even receive, such blessing might be in our power after all. Join me now for a few moments to look back, and be guided by what we see as we think about the year to come.

**Remember and Resolve** I experience the time from the Eve of All Saints' Day through the end of the Christmas Season on January 6 as a succession of rich blessings. It is one of our busiest times, but also one of my favorite. And so many of those blessings are brought to me by the children and families of our congregation and neighborhood, children in whom joy and wonder always seem especially in evidence.

**Trick, Treat, and Dream** Between the demographics of our neighborhood and the proximity of the Willard School, Fairmount Road is something like the Fifth Avenue of Halloween trick or treating. The last two years, storms have significantly abridged this festival of imaginative fantasy, neighborhood hospitality, and festive, youthful adventure, but I look forward to its full return in 2013. At its best, Halloween is a time when the very young begin to imagine that they can be whomever they choose, and as they go from house to house they are welcomed, admired, celebrated, and given a gift. Imagine a world in which there would be no barriers to aspirations, where every door would be opened in welcome, and where an amazingly diverse collection of characters would live and play together with laughter and delight.

The next day, All Saints' Day, explores similar themes for adults—the remembering of those famous and those known best to us and to God creates another kind of gloriously eclectic community. All of us, in whatever costume we have chosen for this life, are on a journey to a door which will be opened to us with welcome and blessing. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews talks of a great cloud of witnesses; in the season of All Saints I think of the great crowd of companions who have

gone before, and imagine in these days that they somehow make their continuing presence felt more clearly.

**Into the Garden** On a Sunday in this All Saints' season I take the younger Church School classes out to the Memorial Garden and, with their teachers, introduce the children to where the earthly remains of many of our "saints" reside. We talk about the end of this life and the beginning of the life to come, I describe our funeral and burial customs at St. Elizabeth's, and we finish by visiting the plaque in the narthex which lists the names of those in the garden. In 2013 more of us will be in the Garden, and on a Sunday in November, when we, or you, visit there again, may God conspire to bring us all together once more in the mystery of the Communion of Saints.

Near the end of the month we come to Thanksgiving Day, a holy day rooted not in the bible but in our national history. In Ridgewood our strong community of religious leaders offers each year a service in Thanksgiving week in which we show forth how each of our traditions offers thanks to God for the blessings we have received. We model, for an hour or so, a world in which Muslims, Christians of many varieties, Jews, Hindus, Unitarians, and others, spanning the races, cultures, and nations of the world sing, pray, and gather food for those in need. We do not talk about diversity and respect so much as we simply live it. In 2013, I hope you will consider entering into this parallel universe, so different from what we see in the newspapers and on the news, when I invite you to this interfaith Thanksgiving service. You can not only cast your vote for a different way to be the world, you can, for a time, step into it and make it real. With a spirit to know and to love God, and the courage to persevere, who knows what we might do.

**A book is also a magic door** And in November every year the third grade and I step through an enchanted wardrobe in a mysterious English country house into a world where, when we arrive, it is always winter and never Christmas. By the time we leave, after five weeks of reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the kingdom of Narnia is a very different place. And perhaps because of those afternoons in front of the fireplace in the Rectory living room, the children, the parents and other adults, and certainly the reader, have also been transformed first by wonder, and then by joy. To behold a room of high energy eight-year-olds fall suddenly silent with the first words read aloud each week demonstrates the power—and the almost magical appeal—of a good story. In 2013 perhaps we might all seek out good stories to share with children—at church, at home, at school, in the library—and to step into ourselves.

At the very end of November we gather for an Advent party—a pot luck supper, a dazzling array of seasonal craft projects, and two hours in which our parish hall becomes something like a village fair set up to engage and delight children and their parents. Looking around the room you see new families and long-time parishioners, children, and, in some cases, parents who in their day were themselves children here, all bustling about making advent wreathes, Christmas ornaments, coloring decorations, spreading glitter, stringing popcorn, and turning black and white advent poster calendars into bright displays of the countdown to Christmas Day. In 2013 let us remember to make, and save, time for fellowship and for creative play in which we make, design, color, and construct and interact more with one another than with screens and keyboards.

On the first Saturday in Advent, I gather with the first grade to introduce them to the season, our practice of Communion, and the mysteries of the sacristy. We explore the Visitation Window—it was given in memory of Doris Coviello and I always imagine her as part of that festive gathering of six-year-olds for whom the prospect of Christmas is becoming more and more vivid.

At the end of our hour, having lowered the advent wreath and lit the candles, we sit at the foot of the altar and read the Christmas story from an illustrated children's bible. And because they are

beginning their reading lives this year, we present each child with their own copy of the book as we finish.

The joy and wonder is evident on their faces as they receive the book and turn with growing delight from page to page pointing, sharing, and sometimes exclaiming. My prayer then is that something of this joy and wonder will always be theirs. Perhaps you might think how you might seek to connect, or reconnect, with that yourself in 2013.

**Hark!....**I first hear “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing!” emerging from the choir room in mid November, and the next thing I know it is the Advent Concert with the children singing in the front rows, the orchestra playing, rank on rank of the adult choir on their risers, and Garah swooping somewhere between the floor and the ceiling sustained aloft by the vigorous waving of his arms.

Just two days after the school shootings in Connecticut we gathered twice on Sunday, December 16. In the morning we gathered, looked into great pain and fear, and the fact is, we were all shaken. We read the names, we said the prayers, and we remembered that the light, the love, and the power of God is finally stronger than any darkness. But the darkness that day was palpable. It was the call to courage and perseverance that I thought of that morning. Because it was a Family Sunday, Communion took longer than usual, with children scrambling down from the choir to join their parents and siblings to receive together the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. Little children came forward, some to receive a blessing, some the bread and wine, according to the custom of their families. We ourselves were not in that moment in the valley of the shadow of death, but it felt unusually, soberingly close.

Darkness is vanquished not by the memory of light, not by the idea of light, and not by light somewhere else but by light’s immediate presence here and now. In 2013 we will encounter much darkness, some of it personal some of it public. Let us prepare ourselves, daily, that we might, when that darkness comes, not only find light but share it generously.

That same afternoon, with a choir whose ages extended over seven decades, we welcomed more than 300 of our parishioners, neighbors, visiting family, and friends to proclaim in music the joy and wonder of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Up in the balcony, one of our youngest members, not quite one, and baptized just a few months ago, waved his arms in time with the music, perhaps showing that God was already answering strongly in the affirmative our prayer that A.J. receive an inquiring and discerning heart. In 2013 may all of us, be so animated by, and attuned to, the Spirit that we might in our own way also bounce to its rhythm and show forth its beat.

At this writing, the Pageant is still a week ahead, Christmas Eve the next day after, the caroling at Bergen Regional Medical Center the day after that, and a few days later, the reading of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* at the Rectory. We continue in the Christmas season with lessons and carols on Sunday the 30<sup>th</sup>, a noon Eucharist on January 1, and, at the end of the Christmas season, our annual pilgrimage and expedition to St. Paul’s in Paterson on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

Perhaps this might be a good prayer for all of 2013:

Give us, O Lord, an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage and will to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. *Amen.*

The Rev. Canon John G. Hartnett  
*Rector*