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Dear Friends,

Among my most treasured memories from childhood are those set in preparation for holidays. Carving a pumpkin for Halloween, helping to prepare Thanksgiving Dinner (since my mother reads this I need to add that I did not do much, but I certainly enjoyed sharing in the spirit of getting ready), baking cookies or cranberry bread for the holidays, and, perhaps most of all, decorating the Christmas tree. And if I am honest, I even have fond memories of shopping for the tree despite the fact that my father and sister were perfectionists and I had more a “let’s-check-this-off-the list” approach.

**What do you remember?** I will not say that the preparation was actually better than the event, but those memories are somehow richer, more three-dimensional, and more—in the way one might talk about a wine or a sauce—complex. Perhaps it is because those recollections cover a longer period of time, perhaps it is because they usually involve activities and things to do, and perhaps most of all because they involved being part of a family—a group of people each with their own personalities and issues, but, in the course of preparing for something which we all valued, interacting with one another, most of the time, on our best behavior—and not out of any sense of duty or compulsion, but simply because we wanted to make it the best time we could.

Sitting on the floor and opening a present on Christmas morning was, at the time and even the more so in retrospect, not nearly as rich an experience as the wrapping, the decorating, and the testing of the Christmas tree lights before putting them up all to the background accompaniment of our essentially unchanging collection of Christmas records on the stereo. There is a limit to how much we can cram into a short time, and the work of preparation enables us to extend the experience over days or weeks, and somehow that takes off some of the pressure.

**Lifting up the humble** Looking back, there is a kind of role reversal: what we thought was the focus and the main event has proven, over the years, to have been almost the excuse for what we remember most fondly—the anticipation and the preparation, all of which emerge as a lasting treasure of a different order.

Part of the power of those memories derives from their repetition and their seasonal character. They would be repeated with minor variations, and therefore reinforced, every year: getting the tree, decorating the house, bringing up the ornaments—these all followed from year to year as if they

were formally scripted. It was as though another thin layer would be added each time so the resulting work had a richness and a depth which could never be achieved in a single application.

Every year's presents were different, but the tree, the roping, the lights, and the other decorations were substantially the same. And that reliable "sameness" provided an undercurrent of festive stability and joyful order—you could experience the next stage with a kind of eagerness and anticipation because you knew what was coming: it might not always be exactly the same, but there was enough continuity that it was never uncertain.

Promises fulfilled create faith, and faith in something good, reinforced by its fulfillment, creates joy. Perhaps decorating a house for the holidays and looking for the coming of God in Bethlehem have more in common than we might at first have thought.

When the holiday had passed there was always the consolation, perhaps modest at first, but growing with passing months, that Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas would come around again: those times might be in temporary eclipse, but they were certainly not gone or lost. Christmas had come, and Christmas would come again. And each new Christmas brought with it echoes of those which had gone before.

**Time present and time past** Reflections such as these perhaps make more sense when one passes life's midpoint, but I wonder if they might also illuminate something about the nature of a parish and how we might best engage with it to experience more deeply the potential of the season before us.

Maybe one should join the Altar Guild, assist with the Advent Dinner, share in the Greening of the Church, help with the Pageant or the Tree Lighting, join the Christmas morning caroling at Bergen Regional Medical Center, or even join the choir, not to "help the church" but to deepen your experience of this season and to begin to build up those memories which will be resources throughout all of the coming years. What if these, and similar, activities, are not "taking away" from your Christmas time but are in fact defining, enriching, and maybe even reclaiming it? What if they are a way of laying up treasures which will never have to be packed, sorted, moved, or with painful regret, discarded?

**Christmas Eve** Once you are more than about four years old, the Christmas Eve service seems to be over quickly. The weeks before may be like that time at the outset on a rollercoaster ride when it slowly climbs up to the top of the first drop. On Christmas Eve you walk in, and it is candles, and music, and choirs, and some combination of cozy shadow and holy darkness. I sense in people, and occasionally hear it said, that they wish it were not over so quickly. It is probably not the actual liturgy which is too brief (no one has ever asked for a longer sermon...), but the complex combination of peace, joy, safety, recollection of the past, and a sense that for just a brief time, all—or at least much—of the anxiety, fear, disappointment, and uncertainty of the rest of life somehow gets left outside. Perhaps what we actually are experiencing and trying so much to hold onto is simply holiness.

Melissa Baney, a singer-songwriter (and Church School teacher!) in the congregation captured her sense in this experience in a song she wrote about Christmas Eve at St. Elizabeth's with the wonderful title, "High Heels and Hymns." It is a bright, upbeat piece with a skillfully nuanced offering of high spirited celebration with just a hint of underlying wistful longing. Melissa sang part of this song for me last year when we were preparing for her to sing "Silent Night" at the afternoon Christmas Eve service, and its interweaving of joy and longing, of memory and a sense of the present resonated strongly with my own experience of this season.

**It takes two seasons** In the Church we offer not only the four weeks before Christmas as a time of preparation, but we also define Christmas itself as not just a day but a twelve-day season. The Church's timing of Advent and the Christmas season, almost six weeks, is actually much more suited to a rich experience of this time of year than anything offered by a culture which desires the joy of the season but persists in the (fairly questionable) belief that that joy may be conferred by shopping, parties, and presents.

It is not that the culture is faithless—far from it. Not only do we have Black Friday on the day after Thanksgiving, we also have a media vigil to see if by the volume of shopping on that day we will, this year, be saved. I admit that I am fairly tough on the culture, but that is in part because I see close-up the cost, before, during, and after December 25, of good people who put their faith in its gospel. At some point you have to ask if all that we see in various media about “the holiday season” actually delivers the joy, festivity, and peace which it promises? That we persist in activities which fail to provide what we most desire suggests that irrational belief may be found much more widely outside of the church than within it.

**Everyone is a believer** For all people are people of faith and belief: the question is only, What is our faith? and How do our beliefs shape not only our own lives but the culture in which we all live? Faith and belief can never be private matters because of the way they shape our behavior. Look back at your own life and see if you can identify what, or who, has shaped your core beliefs about yourself, about what is valuable, what constitutes success and how to achieve it, what makes for peace, what is the definition of justice, and what is the nature of a good life. The season before us is not a contest between “faith” and “no faith”, but simply the meeting one faith and another, or many others.

Five months ago (on June 4) we had the wonderful story of Elijah challenging the prophets of Baal to a kind of spiritual duel (1 Kings 18). The question was, Whose God actually delivers? I wonder if every Advent and Christmas season is something like the same thing. In the Elijah story, it is a matter of life and death; perhaps it is for us as well.

**Anybody seen God?** Especially at Christmas, God works through the unexpected to reveal what has always been promised. We all know that Christmas is supposed to be joyful, festive, and holy, but we sometimes forget that the story is filled also with darkness, fear, and even violence. In the Biblical Christmas story, the hopes and fears of all the years converge in Bethlehem. If there is no darkness in the story, it is not Christmas, and so if you find yourself at times feeling overwhelmed, sad, lost, or depressed in the season, you may be out of sync with what you see in the media or at the mall, but you are right in harmony with what is going on in the Bible.

Jesus comes to offer us a new life, not just a temporary respite from the old. I invite you to take advantage of the resources the church offers this season to go deeper than superficial celebration, to seek lasting joy and not just settle for ephemeral laughter. By no means should you hold back from celebration—there is so much for which to give thanks this season and so many ways genuinely to share joy with those you love and even beyond. But I invite you to use the four weeks of Advent--still weeks away, so you have time to think about this—as a time to consider honestly what you seek this season, where it is to be found, what will last, and what you may keep always with you. It is very difficult to do this alone, and so we have a church to be a community of people who ask these questions together and seek reliable answers from a time-tested authority.

Isaiah, whose spirit hovers over the season of Advent, puts it this way:

Seek the Lord while he wills to be found; \*

call upon him when he draws near.  
Let the wicked forsake their ways \*  
and the evil ones their thoughts;  
And let them turn to the Lord, and he will have compassion, \*  
and to our God, for he will richly pardon.  
For my thoughts are not your thoughts, \*  
nor your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, \*  
so are my ways higher than your ways,  
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:6-9)

I write all this in November so you will have a month to consider. Advent, to the delight of publishers of Advent calendars, actually begins on December 1 this year. By then, it will be much more difficult to reorient your observance of that season and of Christmas. So I invite you to take the weeks of this month to think about what you truly desire for this Christmas season, to reflect on what from past seasons you most value, and to then plan for this year in a way that you may open and clear the way for all of blessings of Christmas to be yours. Or, as we will hear Isaiah (40:3) suggest, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

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*Rector*