



January 2015

Volume 88 Number 1

Dear Friends,

We assemble *The Tower* around the middle of the month before it is published, so I am writing this to you from just outside of Edinburgh, Scotland, where Susan and I are on the last overseas segment of my sabbatical. We will be back in time for me to officiate at the celebration and blessing of the marriage of Jennifer Whaley and Brandon Hillier at St. Elizabeth's on New Year's Eve. The next day we will mark the beginning of the calendar year, The Feast of the Holy Name on the church calendar, with a celebration of the Eucharist at noon in the choir stalls.

I.

Sabbatical Thanks First, I want to thank everyone who has made it possible for Susan and me to be away on this sabbatical this fall: the Wardens, Chris Walsh and Mary Wynn Seiter, who assume responsibility for the parish in the absence of the Rector; the Rev. Joan Conley, who brought her characteristic grace to leading worship, pastoral care, and the day-to-day life of the congregation; Parish Administrator Ann Dowling, who continued to oversee all of those things necessary to the orderly running of the parish (and who looked after the Rectory in our absence); Marcia Bakshi in the office and the Friday Book Group; Ruben Rosario, who continued to watch over our buildings and grounds and also shared in caring for the Rectory; and the remarkable team we have leading and guiding the congregation: Garah Landes and Catherine Hostetler with our music and choirs (and all of the extra offerings they oversee for the Advent and Christmas seasons); Jenn Liljegren and the Church School; the Rev. Cathy Quinn and the special ministries with our young families; Terry Battaglia and the work with our youth; and Debra Anderson and the very full program of communications in this season. I am also grateful to the Rev. Dr. Maylin Biggadike for her leadership of the Friday morning Bible study of the Book of Ruth, and for her guidance with the Advent Quiet Day, preaching this fall, and sharing the leadership of daily Morning Prayer. I also thank parishioner, neighbor, and Vestry member Elliot Dee for stepping in to help provide leadership for Morning Prayer also. And finally, Hugh Middleton, Alex von Summer, Aidan Walsh, and Bill Olave [Ruben's uncle whom many of you know as our neighborhood letter carrier] who stood by as our reserve snow blowing team, and Fred Canavan, who tuned up the machine and ensured that it was fully ready for the season.

We welcomed Rabbi David Fine to the pulpit at St. Elizabeth's, and the Rev. Ian Hamilton, of the Church of Scotland, blessed us with his preaching on two Sundays during the month he and his wife Margaret were in residence at the Rectory.

II.

The goal of this project And I also want to thank you all as a congregation for this great gift of time away. As I have written over the last year or so in preparation for the sabbatical, this project had a number of goals, but perhaps they all could be summed up in the desire for the leadership of St. Elizabeth's—staff and congregation, clergy and laity—to define a season dedicated to making the life of the congregation strong, healthy, and fresh. This was an opportunity for others to step into leadership roles normally held by the Rector, and it was a chance for the congregation to recognize its own depth of resources apart from the gifts (and liabilities) of a Rector who has been here for twenty-two years. The time away has helped me to see the life of the parish and my role in it from a new perspective.

To be clear, I am not coming back with new agendas or radical new directions. I am returning with an even deeper appreciation of how blessed we are in our congregation, and how your faithfulness and generosity of time, energy, and substance have supported a remarkable, and, alas, fairly rare Christian community. In my travels I saw many buildings grander than ours, but no congregation with the same lively generosity of spirit, generational span, and depth of skilled, positive, and cooperative leadership in so many areas and from so many people. No doubt there are such other places, but they are rare. We are blessed with a treasure, and it is worth all of our (often considerable) efforts to maintain, strengthen, and support it.

The world, and each of us, would be much the poorer if St. Elizabeth's were to take the well-worn path to a diminished, dispirited congregation with few children and young families, choir robes hanging unused in a basement, a building showing more and more signs of neglect and deterioration, and outreach beyond our walls being only a memory of senior members.

That image is something like Scrooge's Ghost of Christmas Future for a parish like ours. It is always a possibility, but it need never be our fate.

Giving and Receiving The life of a congregation is a gift we both receive and give. None of us gave St. Elizabeth's its character and identity, but all of us make it what it is. And the emphasis is on "all" of us. The parish exists not to be an honored institution to draw up our time, energy, and money and be an admired icon, but to be a structure to bring us regularly—through worship, action, and in a context of fellowship—into a closer relationship with God so that, in a culture which sends us many unreliable messages about what makes for good and healthy lives we may all find—at every stage of our lives—true guidance about what offers health, life, hope, and love.

III.

A gift at Christmas On the first Sunday of Advent, Susan and I attended a concert of seasonal music at St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh. One of the songs had a refrain speaking of the three Kings:

One king held the frankincense,
One king held the myrrh,
One king held the purest gold,
And One King held the Hope of the world!

Asserting that the baby Jesus is a king who bears the hope of the world is the sort of thing one expects to hear in December—or even early January¹—in churches, but what could that assertion actually mean? One might theorize that the hope would have something to do with life after death, but I think there may be more accessible, and immediate, content to the claim.

The gifts of the other kings might be understood to reflect reference points in secular culture. Gold—wealth and power; Incense—the signature offering in the ancient world to gods and emperors; and Myrrh—associated with burial in some traditions and with healing in others. Good gifts, maybe, but, so far, nothing earthshaking. The sorts of gifts any ambassadors might give to any new prince. That they impute that status to Jesus is a big deal, but, for the purposes of this essay, a separate topic.

But the fourth gift, borne this time by the baby king, “the hope of the world”—how might we find meaning, rather than empty holiday cliché, in the assertion that Jesus is, or offers, the hope of the world?

A manner of life I wonder if one way—not the only way, but one way—we might understand Jesus to offer new hope to the world would be to look more closely at the manner of life to which he calls us.

In our tradition we summarize that manner of life in the vows of the Baptismal Covenant (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 304-305). The vows are there because they are counter-intuitive—they are not what many would do naturally, nor do they reflect the values of our culture or the culture of the Greco-Roman world of the centuries around the earthly life of Jesus. The whole point of a vow is to choose—publicly—a course of action which we believe to be right, and the vow then stands as a corrective when we would like to do something else. A vow is a mechanism to get us the life we want at the cost of sacrificing the freedom to do whatever we might desire in the moment.

Jesus offers hope to the world because if one actually seriously seeks to order one’s life by the admittedly difficult principles summarized in the Baptismal Covenant, then we have individual hope for better lives, and, more than that, can offer hope to the larger world for healthier culture and communities.

Test the hypothesis Consider two very high profile issues in the culture today, violence in the streets and abusive sexual misconduct in general, but especially on campuses. Our culture is responding to these with investigations, reports, various exchanges of denunciations, debates about new regulations, more training, and a variety of other programs to change behaviors. The Baptismal Covenant’s approach is to say that we mean to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Shooting someone on the street or putting them in a choke-hold is difficult to reconcile with seeking and serving Christ in them. Ditto for pressing forward with unwanted sexual attention. Taken seriously, these vows are not pro-forma phrases just to say in church; they are character, and behavior, defining statements about some of the most complicated interactions we have in daily life.

The Baptismal Covenant says that we will seek justice and peace for *all* people and respect the dignity of *every* human being. That would seem to include people in hoodies and/or very short skirts—as well as people in police uniforms, those who work in the service industries, and, alas, those who show no respect for the dignity of other people. Dignity flows from God-given humanity, not from dress, manner of speech, manners, or class. To treat someone with dignity does not require acquiescence, but it does set limits on how we respond. Perhaps the goal is to let our

¹ Epiphany, the Feast of the Three Kings, is not until January 6 until which date we are still in the Christmas season.

actions reflect our understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God. The prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi in *The Book of Common Prayer* (p. 833) offers a more detailed list of how to put this principle into practice.

What if what makes sense doesn't work? These two sets of vows about justice and dignity come at the end of the Covenant. They are preceded by a promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers. That does not sound nearly as practical as requiring sensitivity training, redesigning police equipment, or setting up boards of inquiry, but my sense is that those responses, while perhaps having some usefulness, will never be adequate to address the deeper sources of our discontent. If we only deal with superficial symptoms, we are not very serious about fixing the continuing problem. So just how serious are we? Would we rather opt for something efficacious but distant or for something close but illusory?

Or, would we rather commit to a program which sounds reasonable but produces lame results, or risk trying something that everyone says is impractical but has the promise of lasting fundamental change. The life of Jesus is first about formation of character, and then guiding that re-formed character into right action. Look at history, ancient or modern, public or personal, and ask how promising a strategy might be if it tries to change actions without addressing character. And forming character requires consistent effort over time, the sort of thing that vows are designed to do.

The hinge of the Covenant is the vow not only to persevere in resisting evil, but *whenever* [not "if ever"] we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord. When things go bad, we look to ourselves, to our own part, to our own responsibility. As much as we would like to blame someone or something else, the Covenant calls us to repent for ourselves, and not for someone else. And the standard by which we judge is the will of God², not our conscience, not the will of the majority, nor what everyone else knows to be right. Looking into our hearts, consulting with our best friends, even seeking professional advice is not the first line of response. (And, just to hint at what I said we did not have room to discuss, the will of God is not found by looking up a topic in an index and finding a Bible verse in which that word appears.) In extreme cases, many followers of Jesus have argued that the law—of the government—itself must be given secondary status.

What the hope looks like The hope that Jesus offers comes from the prospect of a different way to live based on the values of God. Our worth is not a function of our employment, status, wealth, attractiveness, or anything else, but our being loved creatures of God. Imagine what it would feel like actually to believe that without reservation. Love is not about seeking our own delight, but learning how to experience joy in giving it to others. Very aware of our own need for forgiveness, we work to be generous in our forgiveness of others. We can actually be honest about our errors, and thereby have a head start on effectively addressing them, when our identity is not tied up in performance. Security ultimately comes from our relationship with the Creator, not our inventory of elements of creation. Life, finally, is not a function of heart and brain, but of membership in a community—a communion—with God, whom we have seen most clearly in Jesus of Nazareth, at its head. The material world we experience is real, but it is not the full extent of what is real; indeed, what we see passes away, but what God sees, and that includes what God sees in all of us, is eternal.

² How we know the will of God is an issue which requires more space than I have here, and, at least at St. Elizabeth's, perhaps might be better addressed in conversation than in an essay.

Compared to gold, incense, and myrrh; compared to more laws, more rules, more prosecutions and threats of penalties, the life outlined by Jesus, summarized in the vows of the Baptismal Covenant, actually does offer substantial hope. For that gift to be fully realized we need to be active partners—considerable assembly is required with this gift, and undertaking that work is part of how the gift appears in each of our lives. Whether the receipt of that gift brings you to your feet in celebration or to your knees in thanksgiving is up to you. But this gift in the Christmas season is not for Jesus, but from him. May we receive it in the Spirit by, and through, which it is offered.

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Rector