

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

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A New Year is at hand. So often when something new comes along, especially when it is going to come whether we like it or not, such as the calendar date January 1, 2019, (you can't stop it!) we find that we have fears attending. It has been said that the matter is trust, our inability to know what's coming. A tiny baby seems so remote to our fears, and so incapable of assisting us. But that Baby is also known by the name, Word of God. And in the Word of God we can always find our security, and our trust.

Lord, let your word only be spoken, and your word only be heard. Amen.

Some of the greatest and most moving photographs ever taken capture the very simple act of holding someone's hands, and the image of trust. In my family we have two such pictures that come to mind, taken in successive years.

The setting is in a Walnut orchard just outside of my home town of Tulare, right in the middle of the San Joaquin valley. In the middle of the orchard was a wider row between trees that was used as a farm vehicle access. As a result of the trees being further apart than usual, more sunlight was able to break into the ground level of the orchard. It was a professional photographers' delight, and we were there for that purpose. The photographer decided to gather the grandchildren into a line, five abreast, all holding hands. That year they ranged from 2 years old to 10. And as they walked away from us parents and grandparents, the photo was snapped. No faces, just their backsides, which of course, each one of us parents and grandparents knew exactly whose backside was whose [!], and we could see that this was a poignant vision of the future.

Walking together down a picturesque orchard road, with the late fall sun providing both shadows and clear lighted path, they went shoulder to shoulder, strengthened and supported by holding on to each other. The end of the orchard road was not in focus - these are huge orchards - thus giving the impression of being willing to walk together as family despite the unknown, relying upon each other.

Hand in hand.

It's not possible to look at that picture - at least in our family - and not be deeply moved.

All the hub-bub around the adventure of getting there, and getting set, and taking the picture a couple of times to get it right, all that is gone when you are looking at the still picture. You see connection, relationship, family, reliance upon each other, and trust. And, of course, the impression that this would lead them wherever the road took them,

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with no idea whatsoever what the next day, the next month, the next year after the photo would bring them.

And then there is the second picture of these two orchard photos. One year later, and now there were 6 kids in the picture, instead of 5. Same orchard, same posing, shoulder to shoulder, hands held. This time, however, the youngest who was way too young at 6 months to be in the first photo is right in the middle of the group, walking down the orchard road, with the two oldest grandchildren holding onto the hands of the youngest firmly. Maybe those little feet weren't even touching the ground.

I can't look at it without a tear coming to my eye. All the same emotions and reflections. But this time with the added visual of moving together with even the most vulnerable and fragility of comrades, the baby -- and he will always be our baby, won't he. Safety, and security, the forward speed adjusted for the sake of the least.

It is a picture of how we are to trust in God, and walk with each other to get where we are going, only God knows where.

In the Christmas season celebration, which, as you can tell from the church decorations and from the Propers for today is where we are, we are given the opportunity to continue to come to the manger scene and look in on the Holy Family. It is a precious, moving scene of hope, promise, and vulnerability. But with such a tableau, even with all the prophecies already spoken, which we have been given the opportunity to listen in upon, and even with all of our hopeful expectations, it is too easy to be mesmerized, even paralyzed wanting to hold on to that glorious, divine moment. This tableau still seems trustworthy.

But we need more. Like the photos of my grandchildren in the orchard, which can never be reproduced, this Bethlehem moment is one that passes. Somehow we need to be assured in very powerful and profound ways that this savior baby has the capacity and ability to make it with us through every orchard road, every unseen turn, every unknown. We are those little ones; we need more than a baby for security.

John knew this, as directed by the Holy Spirit, and he began his telling of the gospel as he did for this purpose. This Sunday after Christmas in our celebration of the birth of Jesus, by the wisdom of the Church in what we hear on this day does in fact give us the opportunity to carry the Christ child with us, as well as hear the words that the Christ does in fact walk with us, shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand, into every one of our unknowns. With faith.

There is no variation for this Sunday; it will always be the Gospel according to John, the first chapter, the first 18 verses. Why this 1st chapter of John?

As always, the Collect for Today, along with hymns, sets the theme as the Incarnation. *"Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word"*

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But the beginning is not with a baby being born, we are now introduced to the Incarnate Word. The collect is clearly informed by the Gospel, wherein John says in the first four verses:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God; 3 all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

Suddenly we see that this Baby in the Manger is so much more, and has been so much more already. The enormity is very difficult at times to spiritually and intellectually grasp. We have heard now described the presence of this Word of God prior to the conception of Jesus in Mary's womb. And then comes the good news that this baby is that eternal Word, and thus that the manger scene is not the stopping place of our faith.

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth;

As well, the story does not stop with the Word of God coming to us in this manger moment. We hear of growth and adulthood, like human life is supposed to be, and not stopped.

The apostle said,

"We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father.

And going on said

15, (John the Baptist bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.' ")

And finally, the word we also desperately needed to hear, that this Word which has become flesh is with us providing the strength we need in every situation, and on into eternity. He said,

16 And from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Just to underscore this presence with us through it all, whatever may come, let me go back to the beginning verses of John's gospel, and repeat verse 4, and then read through verse 5?

*4 In him (that is, the Word) was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, * and the darkness has not overcome it.*

You heard it. The darkness has not overcome it; that is a present tense statement. It comes from John knowing the whole story, having witnessed not only the baptism of Jesus, but also being right there at the Cross, a dark hour indeed, and also a witness to the resurrected, Incarnate Word, when Jesus rose victorious over sin and death.

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Whether in the light, or in the darkness, as I have believed in Christ, I am not left to beseech only a baby to assist me, to walk with me through it all. And yet, it is this Word made flesh, in fact coming to us as a baby first where I begin my worship. Jesus does not stay there in the manger. My grandchildren are growing up, and not left in the birthing room of the hospital. I do have pictures. But they like me have moved past those blessed and painful moments of being born. None of us may stay there and grow in faith.

We still need that presence of God, his strength, his hand, his shoulder, and so we have it, and so we do continue. We are the baby, and we can trust that Jesus is with us, and will keep us, and walk our walk with us, knowing how much we need him, and how helpless we are without him.

What comes to mind now is that famous Christmas Day message of King George VI of England in 1939. 3 months into their entrance into what would be World War II, and with Adolf Hitler's air attacks on England, with such devastation already felt, and great anxiety about what the new year would bring, he said on BBC radio:

"A new year is at hand, we cannot tell what it will bring,
If it brings us peace, how thankful we shall all be.
If it brings us continued struggle, we shall remain undaunted."

He reminded them of the only true King, the One who can provide true peace and real rest in such troubled times. King George made his statement from his faith in this glorious child Jesus, who is the Word of God, *knowing as well that this Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.*

King George would go on in his radio broadcast of national encouragement and quote from a poem written by Ms. Minnie Haskins, herself a woman of great faith. She had written her poem before and during her time as an English Wesleyan Methodist missionary in Madras, India. At the time King George quoted from her poem, Miss Haskins had been exercising her faith in a place she hadn't seen coming, clearly in the dark from what she had intended on a different continent. But God had led her into a career teaching back at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

The later service will hear the first part of the poem in the anthem which the choir will sing immediately following this sermon. For us here without the choir, I'll read what King George read during his BBC broadcast, and then read to you the rest of the poem, as well. The poem was originally entitled by Ms. Haskins, "God Knows," but you might recall it as "The Gate of the Year."

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

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So I went forth and, finding the hand of God, trod gladly into the night.
And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

....So heart be still:
What need our little life
Our human life to know,
If God hath comprehension?
In all the dizzy strife
Of things both high and low,
God hideth His intention.

God knows. His will
is best. The stretch of years
Which wind ahead, so dim
To our imperfect vision,
Are clear to God. Our fears
Are premature; In Him,
All time hath full provision.

Then rest: until
God moves to lift the veil
From our impatient eyes,
When, as the sweeter features
Of Life's stern face we hail,
Fair beyond all surmise
God's thought around His creatures
Our mind shall fill.

We will not always know where we are going, what's down the road, what's around the corner, how we will maintain control of our lives. As the new year dawns, let us remember that God is our only safe harbor. He is our only true hope. He will lead and direct our lives when we put our trust in Him. He will light our path and direct our steps as we enter into the new year.

Finally, how shall we trust? Recalling the line of the poem, how do you "*put your hand into the Hand of God*" and let Him lead you this year? Or at any time?

It's not by doing better, it's by believing better. It's by trusting that "God knows." He's been there, and He's already been where we are going. "His will is best."
So get to know him better by learning to trust the One who is here, and who will lead us. Do this through the means he has laid out for us in sacrament and devotion, and by being in fellowship with each other, that is, shoulder to shoulder, also, hand in hand. When you know Him better, you will love Him more and you will find peace in Him.

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The petition in the collect says:

"Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; "

The Light of Christ is not only for others through us, it is our daily light that helps provide the trust we need in him; to keep our hand in his hand while we walk this road. We pray for his assistance to walk true and to walk holy lives even when it is dark, wherever God has called us, ultimately not to only one holy spot here on earth, but to an eternal life with God, trusting he is leading us there.

In the Name of God the Father, and God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.