

“By the Dawn of Redeeming Grace”

Christmas Eve Reflection 2020

Reverend Carolyn Patierno

The days have passed through our hearts and souls to bring us – none too gently – to this holy, silent night. Long ago, William Butler Yeats wrote a poem, titled “The Second Coming”. It’s not a poem I would ever have thought to reference on Christmas Eve but 2020 is nothing if not a trickster. Here we are, “slouching towards Bethlehem” guided by a star that is less hydrogen & helium and more determination, and resilience.

So tonight, I will speak of the stuff we carry on our backs in modest survival packs...

I receive an email from the wise man, George Fargo who just in the nick of time reminds me of a few important things when he writes, “This season is a big change of what we are used to but when a baby wants to be born, there isn’t anything that will stop the birth of a child. ... We will not be together this year [to] sing those wonderful songs but we will be together in memory of this most wonderful time of the year. Now we’ve got to think back on all the wonderful times together with loved ones ... like those wonderful times at 19 Jay Street with everyone singing their hearts out making the windows bend with the joy of singing.”

George concludes, “You are with me in many ways, Carolyn. Stay safe.”

And right behind George comes another wise man, Bruce Cummings, whose gift is the just-right poem he shares at the board meeting. I’ll share part of it with you now:

“A Blessing for Traveling in the Dark” By Jan Richardson (partial)

*I do not know
what these shadows
ask of you,
what they might hold
that means you good
or ill.
It is not for me
to reckon
whether you should linger
or you should leave.*

*But this is what
I can ask for you:*

*That in the darkness
there be a blessing.
That in the shadows
there be a welcome.
That in the night
you be encompassed
by the Love that knows
your name.*

In March, in April we did not know what the shadows were asking of us but now, on Christmas Eve, we have a better idea. And in that knowing we have witnessed over and over again, the dawn of redeeming grace for in the darkness there has been blessing. Over and over again there has been blessing and beauty in this most sorrowful year.

But out of every year's 365 nights, without exception, Christmas Eve is the most sorrowful. That's why the Christmas Eve service is so beautiful ... so powerful. All who slouch toward sanctuaries the world over bring with us our particular sorrow to find that sorrow is held by shattering beauty ... held in mystery that is story and song ... and twinkle lights and candle light and poinsettias ... held by a stubborn joy that is ever green.

Only the little kids bring an uncomplicated joy to the sanctuary. All the rest of us carry this beautiful sorrow. Tempered and coaxed by the force of angels; we sing through our tears.

And our tears this year are generous.

Here is the story that presented itself for telling this Christmas Eve. It is the story of one tiny moment that is the definition of redeeming grace that is, a love that saves us.

I am lucky enough to have gone to college. I am lucky enough to have made friends there and then with people who are very much for me here and now. For 40 plus years we have journeyed together sometimes walking upright and sure and at other times slouching for the weight of sorrow.

In August there was devastating sorrow. Kathy died - Dave's beloved wife and hardly an in-law to the rest of us. She was one of us. Vanquished by a brutal cancer, we could hardly breathe for the weight of this loss, none more than, of course our beloved Dave. And then came the cruel conundrum of how to mourn in this time of compassionate distance ... how offer comfort ... how to circle round.

Decisions are made. It will be a graveside service with an outdoor shiva right after and for the days that follow. Dave entrusts me to officiate the service. Whoever can be there will make their way. This after months of sheltering in place, the place where we need to be is at the cemetery with Dave. With Kathy, now of blessed memory.

One by one the mourners arrive. We greet each other in the parking lot. Masks can't cover the shock, the grief that is on full display. There is a force field around us that both stops us from embracing but also beams forth a powerful love.

I say over and over again to others and to myself, "We have 40 years of hugs that will carry us through this day."

After we gather and greet, we return to cars to drive through the narrow cemetery paths. We contemplate, and then decide that Nancy and Vincent will drive the short distance with me with windows open and masks in place. I drive near the head of the long, long line. The trail of cars stops. The cemetery staff will instruct us when we may take our places graveside. In the meantime, we wait, and in this waiting a thousand scenes pass through memory all of which ask how in the world we find ourselves here in this bizarre moment. In this bizarre truth in this impossibly bizarre year. How do we possibly hold this sorrow? In every car in this long, sad line is a human - alive, stunned, with a heart pounding with the weight of these questions for which there are no answers.

These thoughts are stopped cold as Dave emerges from seemingly nowhere and slowly walks up the hill to Kathy's final resting place. He pauses for a moment - long enough that this image will be emblazoned in my memory forevermore.

My steady gaze to my left does not leave Dave as I involuntarily throw my hand out to my right in what I can only describe as moment of near panic. In some recess of my mind, I know that I do not know to what I am reaching. I cannot expect in this bizarre year that Nancy will take my hand. But right now, in the small universe inside this car all thought is suspended for these two old friends.

Our hands clasp in panic, desperation, an assurance of strength and yes, redeeming grace - saving love. We do not look at each other. We are both holding Dave so fiercely and while we hold on to him and to each other so tight we remember ... *everything*. In that one tiny moment there is an entire lifetime of friendship. In the shadows in which that tiny moment dwells, there is a blessing, a welcome in which two friends - actually not just me and Nancy, but all of us - are held by the Love that knows our names.

On this silent, holy night, let this be a blessing: the assurance that in the dark, we gather up what has always been and will always be. That love's redeeming grace is ours to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for better and for

worse. And it will get us through this bizarre time to the time when we will bend the windows with joyful singing.

By the strength of memory and by the strength of our communion, we are with each other in many ways.

Don't forget: remember everything.

Merry Christmas, dear dear Souls.