

*Who do I love when I love my God?
Who is he that is above the summit of my soul?
Saint Augustine.*

Dear Friends:

There is a lot of bling to our celebrations of Christmas now: in millions of strings of tiny lights that bedazzle and enthrall; in the flash and glitter of new electronic gadgets which, perennially, outsell other gifts; in the hopes of many that something extravagant will be delivered to them – something that materially expresses what we don't otherwise find words to say.

The desire for bling has surpassed our earlier hopes to be surprised. Many, instead of offering gifts, have resorted to giving gift cards. It reduces the risk of disappointing others by presenting something not wanted. Recipients are free to choose whatever they wish, acquiring, then, exactly what they like. The consequence of this, however, is that joy comes more from the product and less from the personal interchange of giving.

Truth be told: bling is not the offering of the church at Christmas. In so far as we speak of light in the darkness, it is subdued, like that in a painting by Rembrandt, emanating softly from a source unseen. We have no toys to market, things dazzling in innovation; remembrance is a different kind of gift. The only extravagance in our story comes in the form of humility, which lacks the pizzazz for which we lust.

On the far and opposite side of bling, what we bear witness to is mystery.

The mystery of God's incarnation is not the hiddenness of not knowing, of waiting for something strange or indefinite that will be revealed. This is the drama of presents left under trees and our anticipation of the moment when they can be unwrapped, discovered and owned. The drama of Christmas for the church is the very different mystery of love – the mystery of the relationship of God and human beings suddenly entwined in the intimacy of a single person, distinct in flesh and time.

Ideas are easy to acquire or dismiss. Moods and sentiments come and go. Things treasured today often become the objects we pack away in attics until, finally, we downsize and dispose of them. But none of this casual transience is true of life or of persons. Here we are faced with a different pull, an engagement that, once begun, can't in any blithe manner be summarily undone. In order not to forget, we write histories and keep journals and trace genealogies and build monuments and offer prayers. The love that is intrinsic to life holds us in the mystery of an abiding communion that can't be explained or mapped out. It is an embrace that defies every form of eradication.

Saint Augustine's question is particularly appropriate to Christmas. What do we cherish in our celebrations? Is the meaning of Christmas merely its spirit? Is God just another word for our periodic desire to put a brighter façade on the more mundane routine of life? Or, should we, in a different light, consider more closely how stunning it is that two thousand years has not erased or dimmed our hallowing of the birth of one child – the mystery of God himself binding himself to us in the relative humility of our life. This singular and radical event has power, not as a metaphor, but in the sheer specificity of actual human incarnation. The God we love is the one who has loved us in this ineradicable decisiveness. Our blessed opportunity is to gather in joy to ponder this.

Assistant Rector Patricia Davidson

The other day I was reading a book by Boone Porter called *Keeping the Church Year* and it occurred to me to borrow some of his thoughts for this article. Contained in the paragraph that follows is a combination of direct quotes, my paraphrases and some of my own reflections.

The ending of the church year coincides with numerous reminders (both in nature and in our life together) of our mortality. In the community of the church, at the beginning of November, the feast of All Saints recalls all who have died and also marks the end of the year's cycle of red letter feast days. In our secular community, Thanksgiving celebrates the close of the agricultural year. Out in the garden the leaves are falling and even the mums are turning brown. The days are noticeably shorter and darkness falls early. Concerning this lengthening of the darkness, Porter says: "The coming of night communicates to us, as no words ever can, the transitory quality of life, the futility of so much human busy activity, and the mysteriousness of God's ultimate purpose."

The phrase that strikes me is "the futility of so much human busy activity". Advent invites us to stop: To close the eyes and ears of our minds to the dazzling lights and clanging noises of the world around us, to quiet down, to reflect on our "human busy activity" and, turning toward God, to watch and wait and listen.

Stephanie Clayton, a member of St. Ann's and a poet writes:

Two Kinds of Voices

*There are two kinds of voices
In the world
The loud ones
And
The soft ones.*

*Sometimes you have to
Listen with your heart
To hear the
Soft ones – they are not there
For ears to hear
But Hearts to know.*

Advent is the time to listen for the soft voice of God and to reflect on the mystery of his coming into the world, incarnate, in Jesus Christ and to wait expectantly for his coming again to bring light into the present darkness.

I suggest that one way to do this is to set aside 15 minutes a day – any time, will do – to listen and wait. You might begin with a short prayer, read it slowly, ruminat* on and ponder the words, listen for what God has to say and offer God thanks. One prayer I like to say at this time of year is the Collect for the First Sunday in Advent. (Here 'darkness' takes on a connotation different from Boone Porter's).

Almighty God, give us the grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Or, sometimes it is enough to pray the single word that closes the Book of the Revelation to John and the Holy Scripture: "Maranatha." It means "Come, Lord Jesus!" Amen!

*To 'ruminat' is to 'chew the cud' and my suggestion is to chew the words of the prayer as slowly and deliberately as a cow chews her cud.

Outreach

A long obedience in a single direction.

I had to get a spider, a cockroach, and a lizard out of the bathtub this morning before taking my cold shower by candlelight. None of this is too unusual - there are often critters in the tub, we don't have hot water, and electric outages are common (though this morning was a little more annoying than usual as the lizard kept leaping back into the tub for reasons passing understanding). At any rate, these are but a few of the inconveniences here. Some days the little obstacles truly challenge my "positive attitude."

Later this morning in church, we sang a song with the chorus:

Que lindo es vivir para amar!
Que grande es tener para dar!
Dar alegría, felicidad,
Darse uno mismo, eso es amor.

Translation:

How beautiful to live in order to love!
How great it is to have in order to give!
To give joy, happiness
To give yourself – that is to love.

The song and the words lifted my attitude. We have life and health; we can give love; and we can give ourselves.

I am writing this as I look forward to Advent beginning and the preparation of our hearts for Christ's coming in love once again. I realize that not much has been asked of me by comparison to all that Christ gave for us. The joy of the Christmas season is loving and giving. The Christmas season always lifts my spirits.

Keep praying, Anita

Anita and Michael Dohn are physicians serving as missionaries with La Iglesia Episcopal Dominicana through the South American Missionary Society. They live with two of their four daughters in San Pedro de Macoris in the Dominican Republic. Their two oldest daughters are now attending college in the USA. E-mail: < DohnFamily@sams-usa.org >

Saint John's Soup Kitchen

Saint Ann's team for the Shoreline Soup Kitchen provided a meal on November 21st at Saint John's in Essex. A hearty harvest stew was prepared by Judyt Hutchinson with assorted breads and desserts. Peg Sibley added a festive Fall centerpiece for each table. Irma Duval, Bev Ahlers, Kitty Law, Dot Smith and Judy Hutchinson helped serve and clean-up. Dessert was prepared by Bev Ahlers, Irma Duval, Sandy Olson and Dot Smith. Our group was pictured in the [Valley Courant](#) in an article seeking donations for the Soup Kitchen!

Thanksgiving and Christmas Baskets - Kathy Kronholm

The outpouring of support for the family in need over the holidays has been overwhelming. The certificates, clothes, blankets, food goods and holiday items filled the trunk of my car, making the basket I put out insignificant. The Old Lyme social worker was astounded by the generosity at St. Ann's and thrilled at the support for a family that is working very hard to support themselves.

I have to say that this generosity is present in the parish not only at the holidays, but throughout the year. Every time a need is presented, the response always exceeds expectations. It is truly a blessing and a gift to be part of such a giving community.

Season of Giving

Blood Supplies are critically low! Please donate blood this winter. Every year, as the weather gets cold and often stormy, and the busy holiday season arrives, our state's blood supply falls to dangerously low levels. This puts Connecticut patients at risk -- whether it's a child who needs blood transfusions to treat cancer, or a man waiting for a heart transplant.

Won't you please call 1-8-- GIVE LIFE (800-448-3543) or visit bloodct.org, and make your appointment today? Remember: a single blood donation costs you nothing, and can save up to three lives! The American Red Cross thanks you on behalf of patients throughout the state.

Thank you from Haiti

We find ourselves **at this time of year giving special thanks** for all the many blessings in our life. Some of the blessings are what you have left in the basket outside the Griswold Room, to be sent to Haiti. Surely the recipients are most thankful for all we send and this paragraph is meant as a big **THANKS on behalf of the Haitians**. Please continue to remember these people who are living in abject poverty and in need of our gifts and prayer. **Thank you again.**

Nearly New Shop Lee Howard, Chair

2006 is drawing to a close, and so is the Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Nearly New Shop. We've had a good time celebrating this special year of recognizing the beginnings of the Nearly New and its beginning, stemming from the desire of some special women to serve the community. That desire was the initial driving force that created the Shop, and it remains a key factor in its goals today.

We've celebrated in the community with a table at the Mid-Summer Festival at Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts, at home with an exhibit in the Griswold Room, with a party at the Fashion Show, with the special 50th Anniversary Cards, with interviews with people involved from the beginning, and soon to appear, a brochure written by Alison Mitchell about the history of the Shop. This last made its debut at the Tea for Nearly New Volunteers on Thursday the 14th.

Perhaps the most precious aspect of this celebration has been the friends we have made, from within and outside the parish. Both customers and former volunteers have come to us to tell us tales of when they first came to the Nearly New, or when their parents or relatives did. There are so many different stories of how the Shop has made a difference in so many persons lives...a job gained, a present given, a much needed article of clothing acquired, being able to furnish a kitchen... it goes on and on...not to mention what being part of the volunteer family has meant to a number of persons. Those stories tell the tale of why we are celebrating our 50th!

And now it's coming to a close. Won't you join us in one more easy all parish celebration? **On Sunday, December 31st, the last Sunday of the year, the Nearly New Shop will host the Morning Coffee hour.** Look for delicious home made goodies. **We are all going to be wearing something from the Nearly New Shop, and invite you to do the same.** We'll be looking for you!