

Advent 3A
Trinity, Menlo Park, CA
Lessons and Carols, 10 am

Genesis 3:1-22; Isaiah 6:1-8; Isaiah 40:1-11; Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 11:1-9; Luke 1:26-56
The Most Rev. Dr. Katharine Jefferts Schori

What do you yearn for today, this year? Maybe we should all consider making a list, not for Santa Claus, but for the one who answers the yearnings of St. Nicholas and all the saints.

We actually have some evidence of what was on St. Nick's list. He's known as the patron saint of children and sailors, as well as pawn brokers. The story goes that his neighbor was so poor that he had nothing for the dowries of his three young daughters. Poor and unmarried young women in that era would very likely have been forced into prostitution to support themselves. One night Nicholas threw 3 bags of gold through his neighbor's window – and one version says the third one went down the chimney and landed in one of the girls' stockings. His act wasn't about toys on Christmas morning but saving children from slavery. That issue is still with us, as kids are trafficked into the sex industry or manipulated into drug dealing and petty crime – not to speak of the vast number laboring in mines or sweat shops or begging on the streets. Today some 5.5 million kids are enslaved – here and around the world. Another 30 million adults are living and dying in slavery.

Nicholas is likely the patron of sailors and seafarers for similar reasons, as well as his own experience of imprisonment and torture by the Emperor Diocletian. Over the centuries sailors have often been little more than prisoners and slaves, impressed by navies or shanghaied by merchant vessels, sent to sea under despotic captains, and still to this day deemed expendable. The plight of many fishers and mariners who serve the massive global trade machine is not much better than in Nicholas' day.

Patron saint of pawn brokers? Probably because they offer help in time of need, with redeemable loans secured by personal possessions. Pawn shops may be the only port to be found in an economic storm. A Franciscan monk started a network of charitable pawn shops in 1450, and invited his customers to offer a contribution instead of interest. The shops can often be identified by a sign with three balls or bags of gold.

St. Nicholas' life and legend echo the yearnings of all those Isaiah readings – for a world where the least and lost and left out get what they need: a safe and smooth road, rather than mountain peaks and desolate valleys. A road that leads home to a city where people live out a full life span, with healthy food and adequate shelter – and enough extra for rejoicing. A city with a just economic system that doesn't depend on exploitation and slavery, that provides justice and equity for the weakest, who so seldom seem to get it in this world. In that new world even the violence of creation abates – lion lies down with lamb, and animals become vegetarians – and presumably human beings return to the vegetarian diet God commanded of them in Genesis. In Isaiah's time fierce wild beasts were a real and present danger to his people. Today the human animal is the dominant predator, an ever-present danger to growing numbers of species on the brink of extinction. Many of us yearn to live in a world that still has giraffes and great apes, remarkable birds and tiny creatures we haven't yet discovered.

Almost all human beings yearn for a world where we can live together in peace. No mother or father wants to lose children to war; we all yearn for our loved ones' safety. Deep

down, I don't think anyone truly relishes the conflict and nastiness that seem to be the current norm in our increasingly uncivil society – if for no other reason that it can quickly turn on any one of us. The nastiness and violence is almost always driven by fear – fear of being displaced or dispossessed, fear of the stranger and the unknown, fear of the future.

Isaiah's prophetic vision of peace, justice, and abundance may strike fear into the hearts of some, but only because they see a zero-sum game. God's economy hopes for more than ours. That vision of well-being insists there will be enough for all, that none will be in want, and that none will have the kind of over-abundance that leads to anxious defense of self and property. There's good research that indicates most human beings think "enough" is about twice as much as they currently have, whatever their level of poverty or affluence.¹ We don't have to look very far to see how crippling it is to live without the basics of food, shelter, community, employment, freedom, and hope. Yet it takes hard, conscious, and deeply spiritual work to learn that too much is also a crippling burden. Both too much and too little can deform our humanity, turning us deeply inward, focused only on our own need.

Moving toward 'enough' has something to do with rediscovering our basic humanity – that all of us are made of the same stuff – earth, humus, dust. One who lives in that reality is usually called 'humble' – and all the words have the same root – human, humus, humility. When the first earth creatures, Adam and Eve, ate the forbidden fruit, they began the journey of awareness about want and sufficiency. They're certainly humbled – re-grounded, if you will – when God puts them out of the garden, and the human road ever since has been about coming to terms with our earthy nature. Yes, we are made in the image of God – in mortal, human flesh, and we struggle with the tension. This Advent journey has to do with that struggle and the yearning to find a road through it.

One of Nicholas' contemporaries, Athanasius, described the journey this way: "God became human in order that we might become divine." This season of Advent is a remembrance and a re-enactment, a re-fleshing of that reality. It is not only concerned with yearning for a baby born in Palestine. It is about a second coming of the divine in human flesh – in real, live, human, flesh – today. You and I get the same invitation Mary got – and Isaiah and many others before her – to bear the living Word of God in our own selves. It is a high and holy calling, and a humble one.

The Word is seeking a home here, in this mega-city by the Bay. Human souls need safe and dignified homes, whether artists and musicians or day-care workers and school teachers, or tech employees. Those who bear God's image yearn for decent places that are more than slave quarters, homes in which to settle and grow in living flesh. Bethlehem's cave or humble inn has become today's tent under the bridge, RVs parked on city streets, and caravanserais like the Ghost Ship. I wonder what Las Posadas might look like here... Mary and Joseph going from camper to RV to dormitory until they find welcome and shelter?

There could be far more welcome and shelter, if we wrestle with what's enough. The roots of that word in English are fascinating: two parts, the first meaning *with* or *together* or perhaps *by*, and the second meaning *reaching*, *bearing*, or *carrying*. It points to what Mary brings into the world – the will to bear another's burden; to carry this child both human and divine; to reach out and bring together.

Jesus is God's "enough" among mortals – both reassurance and challenge: 'I will be with you to the end, to the ages of ages,' he says. 'Don't be anxious – God will provide for

¹ <http://www.people.hbs.edu/mnorton/aknin%20norton%20dunn%202009.pdf>

your needs. Be my friends and love one another. Reach out and bear another's burden, as I have carried yours.' When we live like that, there is indeed enough, and the hungry will be fed, the homeless housed, slaves and captives will be set free, and all will sit down at the banquet prepared from before the foundation of the world.

Advent invites **us** to be God's 'enough' in this world. Let our answer be, 'here am I, send me; here we are, send us!'