

The Rev. Deacon George Arceneaux
Christmas Day 2020, Church of the Ascension
Isaiah 62:6-7, 10-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:120

This year has been unlike any other. This time last Christmas Day, I was still sleepy from the evening mass the night before and from coordinating with Santa in the early hours of the morning to make sure my wife's presents were under the tree; I held a turban in hand that Christmas morning a year ago, trussed up in my alb and lined up with the choir of St. Christopher's Episcopal Church out in Oak Park as we celebrated together. I wonder how you felt 365 days ago when the sanctuary of Church of the Ascension was filled with the choir's and congregation's intonation of God Rest You Merry Gentlemen and the organ's pipes playing Bach's Fugue in D major as the faithful gathered to corporately worship Christ the newborn king. Much has changed to say the least and though change is with us every year, change has been particularly present this year. We have changed how we worship. We have changed how we get groceries and exercise, how we work and play and socialize. And change is not necessarily bad, but I suspect I would look the fool if I said on this Christmas Day that, on the whole, the world has changed for the better as a result of 2020. In fact, I fear that the losses and changes and challenges captured in the headlines throughout the year have failed to convey just how hard this year has been. I fear that even invoking the thousands of businesses that have gone under, even reciting the statistics of unemployment that have left so many without a livelihood, even naming the millions infected and hundreds of thousands who have died as a result of covid 19, fails to truly see those who have been forgotten or unseen this past year. Such numbers can convey the magnitude of the loss our world has faced, yet they struggle to convey the particularity of what this virus and what this year have cost so many. For instance, when I think of the struggles we have faced, I conjure to mind a man I met a month ago during my work in hospice. We met laughing as he spoke of how much he enjoyed going to Las Vegas and just enjoying the lights and the sounds and of how much he loved his daughter-in-law. Three weeks later, he lay in bed breathlessly saying he loved that same daughter-in-law who in turn showed her love in what would be their last moments together, shared over an android video call for fear of spreading the infection of which he would eventually die. Such are the particular stories which are unheard in the statistics of our headlines. I know each of you hold particular stories and struggles, unheard and unseen, related to the pandemic and beyond. I know there are stories of lost independence because of medical diagnoses, stories of broken relationships yearned to be healed yet are grieved, tales and scars of fear and worry made privately and intimately manifest in this year of 2020.

Yet as I hold my own sadness over these realities, the changes and their ramifications in the lives of whom I love which are so often unseen or unrecognized, I am all the more moved by our Christmas story; the tale of the Nativity given us by Luke. In spite of all the changes we have seen

this year, we get to hear together as we have each year the story of the Virgin Mary's firstborn son, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. I am heartened and warmed by this story. And I hope this story we have so often heard may warm you as well this December the 25th which may feel particularly cold. May you be heartened in knowing that the hope of Christmas is not one divorced from the struggles of life. Quite the contrary, the Christmas story is about the harshness of life to those who would be forgotten; and how they are not. It is, after all, the story of the King of Kings born not in castle but a barn. It is the story of a laboring mother and father denied a place at the inn, given only a manger to deliver their child; the story of God made manifest amongst ox and ass and parents. The Christmas story is the story of the mother of God who has seen the injustices of the enthroned and the mighty, the rich and the powerful and who knows that in her son, the king of creation who is so unseen in that swaddling cloth lying in a manger, that he heralds the acknowledgement of the forgotten. We see in Christ made manifest God's acknowledgement that the poor and the hungry, the humble and the forgotten are seen and lauded and loved.

I know that 2020 has been one kinda year. Livelihoods and lives have been lost; we have been changed. Yet we and our stories which may feel forgotten amidst the changes of the world are met by the same story told in years past. We are told again this Christmas day of the same savior, born in a barn and destined to die on a cross, who promises in spite of this that just as the circumstances of his birth and life begged that he be unseen and forgotten by the world, he is not. And neither are we. You are seen. You matter. Your hurts and hardships, your losses and pain, they matter. Your passions, your relationships, your story and your goodness; they matter.

May you take cheer this Christmastide. May you find hope and goodness in the world and may you know that you are loved and you are known. Merry Christmas. Amen