

When the Thanksgiving Turkey and Life Explode

Maybe they won't be the worst holidays ever.

That's what I intended to write about, before we realized that our younger daughter should not join us for Thanksgiving, given the state of the COVID pandemic and our assorted health vulnerabilities. Before it hit me hard how much our elder daughter misses her friends and her boyfriend, all of whom were planning to visit in late fall but all of whom are grounded now,



Still Life: Balsam Apple and Vegetables ca. 1820s
James Peale, Metropolitan Museum.

and her fabulous cat, Kilgore Trout, who succumbed to very rapid onset feline leukemia just before Halloween. It was before a niece unfriended and blocked another aunt over national politics. It was before Greenberg Smoked Turkeys in Tyler, Texas, intended source of our Feast, burned to the ground (Dallas and Austin newspapers broke the terrible news: "87,000 Turkeys Explode in Fire: Orders Cancelled." *Texas Monthly* called it the Thanksgiving Tragedy). And there were a few other things in recent weeks. . .

I *mean*. This is one of those years when you dare not ask, "what next???"

So now it's time for me to pull myself together and ask: what's Thanksgiving going to be, without Kate and the Greenberg turkey? Advent, without the chancel wreaths and Jesse trees and chrismons and pageant dramas and holiday parties? Christmas -- lordy, I don't even *know* what we'll be coping with a whole month from now!

I know this, though. On Thanksgiving I will give thanks to the Lord for the lives of the people I love, and for this life, uncertain and -- let's say, *adventurous* -- as it is. I have prayed "give us this day our daily bread" all my life, knowing that it's a metaphorical blessing of abundance in my life, but a literal plea for many people. This Thanksgiving, my prayers will be for the "us" to be the expansive, inclusive, global "us" -- for the spirit of the Lord to remove the hardness and greed of hearts that prevent the distribution of the enough-ness of God's provision in the world so that all might have bread, every day. And I will give thanks upon thanks for those who make it so -- the many food pantries and vegetable gardens and meal providers and cooking instructors and environmentalists and justice advocates that are the ways the

disciples of Jesus in the Diocese of Virginia bring this prayer to fulfillment. I wish I had the whole Norman Rockwell scene at my own table, yes -- but I will not die of hunger before next Thanksgiving, and there will be another chance. For now, I am thankful for all who work to make sure that there is a table set for all our siblings in the human family, the family of God.

Advent comes on the heels of Thanksgiving, and I will offer thanks that it may be the year I really actually "unplug the Christmas machine" and have some spiritual space -- space that in other years would be filled with driving around after work trying to find all the perfect everything's for everybody, every gathering, every room in the house. That would be foolish now, if even possible. Advent and Christmas will be at home, and this year instead of errands maybe there will be time -- time to savor memories: each decoration and ornament that has a story, books we read to the children so many years ago, photos of Christmas past. Time to center myself in the moment, to gaze into a candle or a fire, to listen deeply on the phone with my parents. Time to dream, to imagine, to gather courage for the future that is coming on the other side of our present troubles.

Maybe if the world can breathe a bit, rest a bit, wait and watch a bit, we can lower our collective anxiety and pay attention to what a Savior really looks like. You know, the world has always wanted a powerful king who would fix everything. What the world got was a baby born to nobodies in somebody's garage, who grew up to say, "You are asking all the wrong questions! Stop worrying about money and power and politics! Just treat everybody with the love you'd like to receive. That's all. Simple." It sounds naïve, doesn't it? But it turns out to have been the most powerful force the world has ever known. It defeated death itself. Maybe there will be a moment, a gift of isolation and cancellation, to remember. Eternal life has been offered to us. It's here for the taking, and ours to share.

I'm not sure that I yet believe in my heart that these could be the *best* holidays ever. There's too much sickness and death, too much anger and hatred, too much anxiety roiling even the normally relatively peaceful waters of the church. So they're probably not going to be the jolliest holidays of our lifetime.

But they may be the holiday we never forget -- because wonderful things happen in the middle of the mess, if we'll just allow the possibility of grace, and yes, even joy. Joy, as you've probably learned by now, isn't the same as giddy happiness. Joy comes even -- especially -- in times of pain and grief. It's deeper; it's richer; it's rarer. And it's more precious. Did you ever take a family camping trip that was miserable and rainy and full of flat tires and leaky tents and wet matches, and now it's the story that everybody competes to tell at every gathering? Did you ever have an event so important to you that people who swore they'd never be in the same room together came, and behaved themselves, because they loved you? Do you remember the message of the

painful death of Jesus, the three sad days, and eternal life bursting out of a sealed tomb? That's joy. And joy is most certainly possible, even now.



St. John's Anglican Cathedral prayer candles. Wikimedia Commons.

As I understand the ever-shifting story of the first Thanksgiving, people held a feast to give thanks to God that they were even alive after the year they had. (Are you paying attention?) They were alive and they had something to eat and they were grateful for neighbors who showed kindness in spite of trouble. Maybe this Thanksgiving is a lot closer to the original than most.

So maybe these won't be the worst holidays ever. They'll be, if we let them, a lot like the actual days that we commemorate -- a prayer to God in gratitude that we lived through the year and we are not starving or dying of exposure (and a pledge to make sure the same is true of everyone). A prayer of gratitude for the safe delivery of the baby who will be our Deliverer. A moment of wonder at the starry hosts of heaven silently singing *gloria in excelsis Deo*. A wistful, maybe tearful, moment of missing people we love and even traditions that we treasure. But God is here, we are provided for, the Savior's birth will be celebrated and his return anticipated, and as St. Paul said so well, NOTHING -- neither life nor death, nor angels nor rulers (think about that), nor things present nor things to come (think about that, too!), nor powers, nor heights, nor depths -- neither quarantine, nor health restrictions on corporate worship, nor budgetary entanglements, nor half-crazed neighbors and relatives -- nor anything else in all creation -- NOTHING -- can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Savior. Nothing.

Thank you, Jesus, for all our blessings. We can't wait to see you. Show us your face in the faces we love and serve, and open our weary, fearful hearts to your grace and truth. Come, Lord Jesus; we implore you: come.

Blessings,

Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson