

The Rt. Rev. Jeffery Lee
The Second Sunday of Advent
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
December 8, 2024

All I Want

Dear Santa,

I have been a very good boy this year. I hope you can find at least some of the things on this list. So began a Christmas letter to S. Claus I happened to read just a little while ago. All I want for Christmas is this and this and this. Even just some of this. I have been very good.

What do you want for Christmas? Do you know? That question takes me back to some cherished childhood memories of this time of year. The waiting and longing for that model car set. Coming back home after midnight mass to a living room that had been magically transformed into a Christmas movie set – wading knee deep through packages all over the floor and banked up around the tree. My parents and grandparents loved to overdo the Christmas present thing. By the way, I firmly intend to do the same thing with my 3 year old grandson.

It is, of course, not accidental that gift giving has become the *raison d'être* of the Christmas season for a great many people. Christmas gift-giving is meant to be a sign and a reminder of the gift of Jesus Christ in our lives. The roots of the custom are here in the church, they're here in our story of the baby who is God in the flesh. The giving of gifts is supposed to be a sign and reminder of that incomprehensible gift – a reminder of the deepest longings that baby touches, a sign and a reminder, never a substitute.

John the Baptist came to announce a gift. But it sure doesn't seem to be anything like those endless deliveries from Amazon or those shiny boxes from whatever department stores are still doing business. John's list doesn't sound like anyone's Christmas list I know: Prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Repent, says John, so you will be ready to receive such a gift.

Dear Santa, I have been a good girl. I've been such a good boy. I've tried to live right. I've worked hard all year. Despite the chaos of these times I've gotten good grades and satisfactory reviews. We've kept the parish up and running. I've tried to be a model parent. The marriage looks good ... to our friends anyway. I gave a few bucks to the Salvation Army. I'm working on losing this weight. This year Christmas Day will be different. The family can actually be together this year and I'll get everyone just what they asked for and the house will be perfect and no one will drink too much. Dear Santa ... I hope you can find at least some of what I want.

It's exhausting, isn't it? This "I've been a good boy" world of ours. It's an endless cycle of performing and being rewarded ... or punished. What we really want, what we may have known was important as small children, gets lost in the shuffle until we can no longer say for certain what it was in the first place. The most we can seem to manage often is a wistful look back. Christmas is for children, we say. And Christmas becomes simply a sentimental attendance at the Christmas Eve service, too many gifts lavished on the children we happen to know, and a few warm feelings when we catch the familiar strains of a carol.

But John the Baptizer is up to far more than that. Christmas is so much more than the busyness and the lists and the letdowns. What do you want? What do you really want? As a friend of mine puts it, "What do you ache for?" Do you know? Asking those questions is what a season called Advent is for. Those are the questions at the heart of the Advent gospel. They are adult questions. It's why we're not celebrating Christmas here yet. In church, we're taking the time to ask. Here we're taking some ritual time to listen to John and the prophets: Repent, says John. Turn your life around, clean it out. Clear away whatever is getting in the way of your real, your honest desire – clear it out so God can get in. So you can receive the real comfort Isaiah tells us God wants to give.

The Christian life isn't about being a good girl. God isn't keeping score, waiting to reward or zap us. We do not have to be good enough for God. The gospel of the baby, the good news of this Jesus who was born among us is that we do not have to please God. God is already and forever well pleased with us in Jesus. We are the apple of God's eye. God came to be with us, to be one of us so that we might come to know what it is we really want, to know the only one who can ever satisfy us.

In every human heart there is a God-shaped hole. An aching need for God. And no matter how frantically we try to fill that place with everything else there is, only God will do. When John and the other prophets talk about judgment days and punishment, catastrophes and cataclysms, they are simply telling the truth, and we know they are. When we try to fill ourselves with anything less than what we really want, what we really need, we do suffer the consequences ... sometimes disastrous consequences.

And there are all kinds of substitutes to try and each one has its own kind of judgment to suffer: overwork, status, things, relationships, alcohol, power, control, fantasies of the perfect house, the perfect life, the perfect children, the perfect whatever. Dear Santa, I hope you can find all this. For too many people, Christmas has turned into a high season of substitutes. No wonder it's also a season of consequences. The bills come, the party ends. Depression rises dangerously for some people this time of the year. The highest suicide rates are at Christmas.

I wonder how many of us here this morning are feeling the need for comfort, assurance, faith. I wonder how many of us have some sense that the valleys need to be filled in and the rough spots made smooth and the mountains brought down to size. The valleys and rough spots and un-climbable mountains of life. I wonder if anyone here is stressed out or hung up or secretly dreading yet another Christmas letdown. I wonder if your Christmas list is written ... not the

one to Santa, but the real one. What's on it? What do you really want? What do you ache for that you know all the other stuff can never touch?

So there's still time for Advent. I invite you to let God in on what you really want. Let yourself in on it. In the midst of the busyness and the buying and all the rest take the time to ask yourself what it is you long for. This year let the presents and the preparations and the parties be a reminder of what they can only point to, not satisfy. Bring your heart to Jesus. Bring your heart with whatever it holds. There isn't anything God doesn't already know anyway. There is nothing you have to hide from God ... you don't have to edit your list, you don't have to prove anything. And this is good news.

God loves you and me more than we can know. And God has for us the only gift that can ever fill us. Make room. Make way. And ask God for what you want.