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Sunday, October 2, 2011

Scripture Reading: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

***THOUGHT: Courage is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm.***

—Winston Churchill

Sometimes children remind us of important insights in the simplest things they say.

At a local elementary school, the eighth-graders had an art project that involved making “fish puppets” using only construction paper, plastic bags and bamboo poles. These hollow creatures in some cases measured five feet long and were supported by the bamboo rods stuck into concrete blocks. But the poles could be removed and manipulated by students so the fish could move, “swim” and wiggle like a “fish puppet.”

Anyway, it was a daunting project, and as one student, Tessa, put it: “Obstacles arose on many occasions; obstacles we had to overcome.” The project was finished, and, when it was, the fish puppets were put on display in the hallways of the institution creating a veritable school of colorful, albeit paper, fish.

Here are the reflections of two of the students about the project. The first, coming from Allison, 12, reminds us of three very important qualities needed to make it through life: “I’ve learned a lot through ... this art project,” she said, “such as *cooperation, determination, persistence* and other qualities that will be useful throughout my life” [italics added].

And Logan, 13, says that sometimes you just have to move on: “You cannot have a plan for everything. Sometimes, things just do not go your way, so you have to move on and work with what you’ve got.”

Amen.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Lord God, thank you for teaching me how to cooperate, for giving me a determined spirit, and for enabling me to be persistent in working toward my goals. And help me today to understand that not everything is going to be perfect and that it’s okay to “work with what I’ve got.” And I am thankful I’ve got you, O Lord! Amen.***

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Sunday, October 9, 2011

Scripture Reading: Philippians 4:1-9

***THOUGHT: Cooking is at once child's play and adult joy. And cooking done with care is an act of love.—Craig Claiborne***

Have you done much cooking lately?

If not, perhaps you can remember the days when you did a lot of cooking. If you had a job outside the home, you may have cooked up something for the family when you got home from work. If you were a stay-at-home spouse, then you may have had things in the oven throughout the day, so that at dinner time the food would be ready.

I was thumbing through a cookbook recently that featured some “old-fashioned” homemade recipes. One of these was a recipe for biscuits. I looked at the ingredients, and to tell you the truth, it just didn't look all that appetizing.

The ingredients for biscuits include a couple cups of flour, some baking powder, four tablespoons of shortening, some salt and milk.

I like milk. But you know what? Have you ever tasted flour? How did it taste? Not so good.

Ever taste baking powder? It doesn't taste very good either.

Ever had a tablespoon of shortening? Doesn't taste good.

Ever put a teaspoon of salt in your mouth and let those crystals melt in your mouth before you swallowed? Doesn't taste good at all!

So how can biscuits, fresh out of the oven, taste so good when made from ingredients that taste so bad?

I think life is like biscuits. Sometimes the individual crises we go through from time to time don't taste so good. But later, after we've come out of the “oven” or the fire, we realize that just maybe they were necessary to make us into a pleasant and healthy “biscuit Christian” — that is, someone who “tastes good”; someone who has something to offer to others.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have given me everything in my life I need to be molded and “baked” into just the person you want me to be. Sometimes I think I am too old to be growing spiritually anymore. Help me to understand that there is always much to learn; that there's always room for growth. Amen.***

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Sunday, October 16, 2011

Scripture Reading: Matthew 22:15-22

***THOUGHT: The habit of giving only enhances the desire to give.*** — Walt Whitman

A month after her wedding, Cami Walker got an unwelcome surprise. She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Her life would change forever.

Not long after, while going through a particularly painful episode, she recalled the advice of a friend: “Try to give away a gift every day for a month — 29 days.” She took up the challenge.

By Day 29, she was amazed by the “magical and miraculous shifts” in her energy for life. “I was feeling happier, healthier, and more in awe with life. I found myself smiling and laughing more. My body got stronger and I was able to stop walking with my cane by Day 14.” And the list goes on.

I mention Cami’s story because in the Matthew reading for today, Jesus mentions giving. He says we should give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what belongs to God.

*How* do we give to God? We give to God when we offer something of ourselves to others with no expectation of reward.

*Why* do we give? We give because it is good for us. We’re like the Dead Sea — if we only receive blessings without giving them away, we become stagnant, lifeless and unhealthy.

*What* can we give? Whatever it is, it must be intentional. We must intentionally offer our gift as our act of worship. You might give someone a phone call. You might write a small thank-you note to a staff member. You might offer a small treat to someone. You might give the “widow’s mite” to your church.

Think it over. You will think of something. And soon, you, too, like Cami Walker, will enjoy the blessing of giving.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Dear God, you are the greatest Giver in the universe! Open my eyes to see ways I can give to others. And I thank you for all the people in my life who give so much to me. In Jesus’ name. Amen.***

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**Sunday, October 23, 2011**

**Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

## **The Burial of Moses**

By Nebo's lonely mountain, on this side Jordan's wave,  
In a vale in the land of Moab, there lies a lonely grave;  
But no man dug that sepulcher, and no man saw it e'er,  
For the angels of God upturned the sod, and laid the dead man there.

That was the grandest funeral that ever passed on earth;  
But no man heard the tramping, or saw the train go forth;  
Noiselessly as the daylight comes when the night is done,  
And the crimson streak on ocean's cheek grows into the great sun,

Noiselessly as the springtime her crown of verdure weaves,  
And all the trees on all the hills open their thousand leaves,  
So, without the sound of music, or voice of them that wept,  
Silently down from the mountain crown the great procession swept.

Perchance the bald old eagle, on gray Beth-peor's height,  
Out of his rock eyrie, looked on the wondrous sight.  
Perchance the lion, stalking, still shuns the hallowed spot;  
For beast and bird have seen and heard that which man knoweth not.

And had he not high honor, the hillside for his pall;  
To lie in state while angels wait with stars for tapers tall;  
And the dark rock pines, like tossing plumes, over his bier to wave;  
And God's own hand, in that lonely land, to lay him in the grave?

In that deep grave, without a name, whence his uncoffined clay  
Shall break again — most wondrous thought! — before the judgment day,  
And stand with glory wrapped around on the hills he never trod,  
And speak of the strife that won our life with the Incarnate Son of God.

O, lonely tomb in Moab's land, O, dark Beth-peor's hill,  
Speak to these curious hearts of ours, and teach them to be still.  
God hath his mysteries of Grace — ways that we cannot tell;  
He hides them deep, like the secret sleep of him he loved so well.

—Mrs. Cecil Frances Alexander

***THOUGHT: Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.***

—Søren Kierkegaard

**NOTE:** Today's reading in Deuteronomy describes the death of Moses, the great leader of the children of Israel. The full version of this poem can be found on the World Wide Web by doing a simple Internet search.

***Prayer: O God, your loving kindness is my daily blessing. Amen.***

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**Sunday, October 30, 2011**

**Scripture Reading: Joshua 3:7-17**

***THOUGHT: Music is what life sounds like.*** —Eric Olson

Mahalia Jackson: It's been almost 40 years since she went home to gloryland. This week also marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth.

Imagine, if you can, the scene. It's 1950, and in Carnegie Hall, just off Broadway in New York City, something historic is taking place. The famous venue, for the first time, sees a gospel singer take the stage, a *colored* singer at that. The orchestra plays and then, from the depths of her soul, her powerful contralto voice brings forth the words: *Roll, Jordan, roll; Roll, Jordan, roll; I want to get to heaven when I die, To hear old Jordan roll.* (See Bible reading above.)

The fact that Mahalia Jackson is standing on that famous stage at all is a wonder. She is almost 40 years old, and her life story is one of crossing over boundaries, just like the song she sings. She was born on October 26, 1911, in the Black Pearl section of Uptown New Orleans. Little Halie, as she was known then, grew up in a ramshackle three-room house on Pitt Street that housed 13 people and a dog.

Halie loved to sing and church became her outlet. She began to sing regularly at Mt. Moriah Baptist Church where she was baptized. In 1927, at the age of 16, she and her relatives moved to Chicago as part of the Great Migration. At a church service in her new home, she sang an impromptu version of her favorite song, "Hand Me Down My Silver Trumpet, Gabriel." She was invited to join the choir, began touring with the group, and soon landed a job as a soloist, collaborating with Thomas Dorsey, known widely as "The Father of Gospel Music."

She refused to sing anything but sacred music. Her 1948 recording of "Move On Up a Little Higher" sold eight million copies, which was a staggering number for the time, especially for a gospel recording. Two years later, there she was, standing on the stage at Carnegie Hall. It would not be her most famous performance, however. She sang at President Kennedy's inaugural in 1961 and, in 1963, she would sing stirring renditions of "How I Got Over" and "I've Been 'Buked and I've Been Scorned" at the March on Washington on the same stage where Martin Luther King, Jr. would give his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Mahalia Jackson died in 1972 at the age of 60. Singer Harry Belafonte would eulogize her as "the most powerful black woman in America" — a title that might have seemed impossible for a bowlegged, orphaned and abused little girl growing up on Pitt Street.

*O, mourners, you ought to have been there; Yes, my Lord! A-sitting in the kingdom, to hear Jordan roll.*

—Bob Kaylor

***Prayer: O God, you are able to roll back the waters of Jordan. But we must step into those waters with the feet of faith. Thank you for music which so often inspires us to such faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.***

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**Sunday, November 6, 2011**

**Scripture Reading: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25**

***THOUGHT: We need the power of love not the love of power.***

Last Tuesday, many churches, Catholic and Protestant, observed All Saints' Day. This special day always occurs on November 1, and is sometimes called *Allhallows* (thus Hallow-een or eve, the day before) or *Hallowmas*.

All Saints' is a day in which the church honors the saints who have gone on before us. And there are many. Where would the church be today without people like the apostles, and Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and many others? In our prayers today, we might consider thanking God for these people by whose light we still live today.

On a personal level, we might also think of those "saints" in our life history whose light has also guided us. They are not saints in any liturgical or ecclesiastical sense, but they are saints in the sense that their lives have inspired us over the years and their influence on us was formative. Who were such people in your life? Mother? Father? Teacher? Friend? Spouse? Today, you might not only give thanks to God for the saints of the church, but also the saints in your life.

In Hebrews 12, the writer notes a "cloud of witnesses." He says: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us ..." The cloud of witnesses to which he refers are those of whom he wrote in chapter 11 — people of faith such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and many others who suffered horrible persecution. When the writer refers to a "cloud of witnesses" in Hebrews 12:1, he is thinking of these people.

Today, we are called to run the race of life with the qualities of patience and perseverance as though this "cloud of witnesses" were seated in a great arena watching our performance on the field of life. These are people who once were in the games. Now they have their reward.

On All Saints' Day we take a moment or two to honor them and to be grateful for their lives.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for the "saints" I have been blessed to know. And thank you for the saints I was not honored to know, but who showed us how to live. In Jesus' name. Amen.***

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**Sunday, November 13, 2011**

**Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:14-30**

***THOUGHT: Too often when all is said and done,  
there has been more said than done.***

Not long ago, I was contacted by a mother who had a young son in Cub Scouts who needed to get a certain badge. The child needed to talk to someone in “mass communications.” She knew I was an editor and a writer and thought perhaps I could help.

The morning of the appointment, a slightly built diminutive lad appeared — small narrow face, pointy nose, wide blue eyes, dishwater hair with a fuzzy cowlick. I said that the first thing an editor does in the morning is ... have a cup of coffee. I didn’t offer him one — his mother was standing right there — but we started to talk. He had questions prepared about what a writer writes about, what exactly I do, what tools do I need to do my job, and so on.

After chatting for a while, I plopped him in my big black Captain Editor chair that swivels really cool. I had a cover design on the big-screen monitor prepared, and I had a photo file with the photo for that cover. I directed him as he took the computer mouse, found the file, double clicked and — voila! — the photo popped on to the page, and there we were! All of which pleased him and his mother.

A couple of days later, I got a thank-you note which read: “Dear Mr. Merrill, Thank you for taking the time to show me how people communicate with other people. From Sean.”

I smiled. I wish I knew — really knew — why we often have so much difficulty understanding each other. So many problems in the human family would evaporate with good communication.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray to God. I’d like to ask Jesus to teach me to communicate with people.

“Lord, teach me to communicate ...  
—with utter honesty ... but to know when it’s appropriate to do so;  
—with complete integrity, wanting nothing for personal gain;  
—with simple sincerity, that my meaning may be clear;  
—and with heartfelt encouragement, that others may be better for it;  
—and if I can’t speak with honesty, integrity, sincerity and encouragement, Lord, help me to keep my big mouth shut. Amen.”

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Lord, help me to be sensitive to what others are trying to tell me today. In your name. Amen.***

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**Sunday, November 20, 2011**

**Scripture Reading: Psalm 100**

***THOUGHT: A smile shortens the distance between two people.***

I can imagine that once again on this Thanksgiving Day, Patricia McCalop is re-telling the story of what happened two years ago. It was a Thanksgiving to remember.

McCalop was busy preparing a Thanksgiving meal for her extended family, as millions of grandmothers across the country were also doing. If it was a typical meal, she had the yams cooking, the cranberry sauce ready, a bean casserole warming, and of course the turkey with the stuffing was getting nicely browned in the oven. Meanwhile, the family was in the parlor visiting and enjoying the day.

Then suddenly, McCalop's daughter went into labor two weeks early. Patricia sprung into action. She called 911 and got a dispatcher on the line who helped her deliver the baby — a beautiful little girl — her own granddaughter.

But, the delivery was not without complications.

The most important one was that the Thanksgiving turkey was in the oven and needed basting. She didn't want that turkey to dry out, so she kept running back and forth during the delivery to baste that turkey.

Patricia McCalop delivered both a baby and a turkey that day two years ago. It was Thanksgiving Day and Labor Day all rolled up into one. They had much for which to be thankful.

After the baby was delivered, paramedics arrived and took the child to the hospital to ensure everything was okay. The child weighed in at 6 pounds, and was fine.

I'm sure you have some Thanksgiving memories you cherish, traditions which mean a lot to you.

The most important thing about Thanksgiving, however, is that we live thankfully all year round. Just as Mother's Day is not the only day we love our mothers, so Thanksgiving day is not the only day we're thankful. It's a day in which we formally recognize that we're blessed.

But we are most blessed when we live thankfully every day.

I hope you have a very thankful Thanksgiving Day this week!

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Thank you, O God, for the many blessings in my life. Amen.***

## First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2011

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

***THOUGHT: Hope does not deny the circumstances of the present, and hope doesn't help us get out of our difficulties. Hope doesn't get us out, but it does get us through.***

—Peter Gomes

Today is the first of four Sundays of Advent when we begin to prepare for the coming of the Christ child. Many churches mark each Sunday of Advent with a candle and arrange them in what's called an Advent wreath. Often the candles are purple, with a center, larger candle of white, called the Christ Candle, signifying Jesus Christ.

Each candle for the four Sundays is given a theme. Today's candle is the Candle of **Hope**. Advent 2 is Peace, Advent 3 is Joy and Advent 4 is Love. And all the candles are placed within a circle, or wreath of evergreens.

The late Peter Gomes, of Harvard Memorial Church and Homiletics professor at the divinity school, asked rhetorically where one looks for hope. The answer, he said, is that — according to the Bible — one “looks first to the place of suffering and stress.”

It is the person feeling the heat who's cooled off by the winds of hope. Without suffering, without stress, without concern, one cannot experience the blessing of hope.

Certainly the birth of a child is an occasion for hope. When a baby is born, the parents dream and hope. They have hope that, in spite of the perils and dangers that may lie ahead, their child can survive them, and perhaps even alleviate the pain of others.

Jesus represents hope for us, as he came to relieve our suffering, to give us what we need to get through it, and most important to remove the stain of sin from our lives.

Whatever your fears and suffering today, you are invited to grasp at hope — the certainty that Jesus will bear you through whatever each day may bring.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are the hope of the world. You are the hope of my life. May many turn to you this Advent season to find rest for their souls. Amen.***

## Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2011

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

***THOUGHT: We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God.*** —Thomas Merton

Today is the second of four Sundays of Advent, when we prepare to welcome God into our human experience. We mark that as happening on December 25 when Jesus, the Son of God, came to us in the form of a child.

Many churches mark each Sunday of Advent with a candle and arrange them in what's called an Advent wreath. Often the candles are purple, with a center, larger candle of white, called the Christ Candle, signifying Jesus Christ.

Each candle for the four Sundays is given a theme. Today's candle is the Candle of **Peace**. Advent 1 was Hope, Advent 3 is Joy and Advent 4 is Love. And all the candles are placed within a circle, or wreath of evergreens.

The Advent wreath is full of symbolic meaning. One resource describes it this way: "The wreath is made of various evergreens, signifying continuous life. The laurel signifies victory over persecution and suffering; pine, holly and yew, immortality; and cedar, strength and healing. Holly also has a special Christian symbolism: The prickly leaves remind us of the crown of thorns. The circle of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul and the everlasting life found in Christ. Any pine cones, nuts, or seedpods used to decorate the wreath also symbolize life and resurrection. All together, the wreath of evergreens depicts the immortality of our soul and the new, everlasting life promised to us through Jesus Christ."

Today's candle is the Candle of Peace. We are reminded that Jesus is our peace, that he came to give us peace, not "as the world gives," but genuine peace. We are reminded that through Jesus we have peace with God (Romans 5:1). And we remember that our Advent preparations are in expectation of the coming of the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: O Emmanuel, Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, desire of every nation, Savior of all peoples, come and dwell among us. Amen.***

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## Third Sunday of Advent, December 11, 2011

Scripture Reading: John 1:6-8, 19-28

**THOUGHT:** *Joy is increased by spreading it to others.* —Robert Murray McCheyne

Today is the third of four Sundays of Advent. Many churches mark each Sunday of Advent with a candle and arrange them in what's called an Advent wreath. Often the candles are purple, with a center, larger candle of white, called the Christ Candle, signifying Jesus Christ.

Each candle for the four Sundays is given a theme. Today's candle is the Candle of **Joy**. Advent 1 was Peace, Advent 2 was Hope and Advent 4 is Love.

Sen. John McCain tells about one of his experiences at Christmas when he was being held by the North Vietnamese. Many times, he says, he found himself "asking to live just one more minute rather than one more hour or one more day." But he was able to hang on because of prayer and his spiritual resources.

At Christmas he was the "room chaplain," a position that fell to him not because of his "excessive virtue," but because he had been to an Episcopalian boarding school and knew all the prayers. They asked for a Bible, but his captors said they didn't have any. In fact, Americans had sent thousands of Bibles. Still they managed to rustle up one Bible. McCain was told that he could copy some prayers and stories from this one Bible.

They put a service together that consisted of a Bible reading which McCain read followed by a song from their "choir," and then McCain talked about the birth of Christ, and the choir sang "Silent Night."

McCain writes: "I looked around the room and there were tears in those men's eyes. They weren't tears of anger or fright or sorrow or bitterness or even longing for home. They were tears of joy that, for the first time in seven years for some of them, there was a celebration of Christmas together as Americans."

Joy is a river that runs very deep, much deeper than the shallow streams of happiness. At this time of the year, we can truly sing with the hymn writer: *Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her king!*

—Timothy Merrill

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, we sing with joy today for the Savior has come! We receive with joy this one whose coming has meant so much to all! Amen.*

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**Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2011**

**Scripture Reading: Luke 1:46b-55**

***THOUGHT: Love is the greatest gift we can give or be given.***

Today is the fourth of four Sundays of Advent. Many churches mark each Sunday of Advent with a candle and arrange them in what's called an Advent wreath. Often the candles are purple, with a center, larger candle of white, called the Christ Candle, signifying Jesus Christ.

Each candle for the four Sundays is given a theme. Today's candle is the Candle of **Love**. Advent 1 was Peace, Advent 2 was Hope and Advent 3 was Joy. And all the candles are placed within a circle, or wreath of evergreens.

Willa Cather's Christmas story, *The Burglar's Christmas*, portrays a young man, the proverbial prodigal son, who had moved away from his family back East and was in Chicago. Without food for many days, without friends, and with suicidal thoughts, he decides on Christmas Eve to steal some food from a house. He had never stolen before but thinks that he is owed some food at least on Christmas Eve. When he breaks into the home, however, he finds that he has burglarized the house of his parents — who had moved to Chicago. His mother catches him while stealing, and he confesses all to her and to his father.

He prepares to leave, but they say, "Stay. We'll make things right."

He looks up at her questioningly, "I wonder if you know how much you pardon?"

"O, my poor boy, much or little, what does it matter? Have you wandered so far and paid such a bitter price for knowledge and not yet learned that love has nothing to do with pardon or forgiveness, that it only loves and loves and loves?"

Yes, at Christmas, we remember that God is love and that God loves and loves and loves.

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Loving God, you loved the world and gave your only Son that whoever should believe would have everlasting life. Thank you for your great love. Amen.***

## Christmas Sunday, December 25, 2011

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

***THOUGHT: Remember, if Christmas isn't found in your heart, you won't find it under a tree. —Charlotte***

Every year, CNN hosts a lavish special television show to showcase ten “heroes” who have changed the world or made a difference in the world. And then one is selected as the CNN Hero of the Year. (Ask someone who won the 2011 award. At the time of this writing, this information was not available.)

In 2010, this person was Anuradha Koirala of Kathmandu, Nepal; in 2009, the HOTY was Efren Peñaflorida, of Cavite City, Philippines; in 2008, Liz McCartney, of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, was announced as the winner; and in 2007, the first year of what is now an annual event, the Hero of the Year was Pablo Fajardo, of Ecuador.

Anuradha Koirala, last year’s winner, is a social activist and the founder and director of “Maiti Nepal,” a non-profit organization in Nepal dedicated to helping children and women who have been separated from their families and forced to take part in immoral and degrading activities. According to one Internet source, Maiti Nepal operates a rehabilitation home in Kathmandu, as well as transit homes at the Indo-Nepal border towns, preventive homes in the countryside, and an academy in Kathmandu. As the name suggests, Maiti Nepal (“maiti” meaning “mother’s home” in Nepali) has been a refuge for women rescued from locations in India. The women can stay in the homes run by Maiti Nepal until they are able to return to their homes, or if not accepted by their parents they may stay until they become able to live on their own.

To these victims, Anuradha is truly a hero, a savior. She deserves the honor which was bestowed on her last year.

We don’t think of Jesus as a hero, do we? We think of him as our *Savior*, for he rescued us, too. He lifted us up, he brought light into our darkness. And on Christmas Day, we rightly celebrate his birth. For this day marks the day that God broke into our humanity to send Someone to save us, because it was clear we could not save ourselves.

Let the Christmas bells ring! “His name shall be called Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

—Timothy Merrill

***Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for coming to us. Be with us now and always. Amen.***