

The Rev. Seth Dietrich  
December 17, 2023 - Advent IV

What do you want for Christmas?

What do you want for Christmas? We are mid-way through Advent. Today is *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is Latin for rejoice, and it comes from Mary's *Magnificat* when she sings, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Perhaps this is a good time to take stock of what we want for the rest of this Advent and Christmas season.

The sensory pleasure of this time of year are unique. They add to the magic, and maybe this is what you want. Like, I want to taste something warm with ginger and cloves. I want to make my family watch the film *Love Actually* again. I want to run my hand over old Christmas ornaments and revel in the nostalgia.

What do you want for Christmas? Maybe it's not sensory. Maybe it's about the gifts, something you want to give or receive, something beautiful or useful. There's an old story about a little boy named Sammy. All of Sammy's friends were getting new bikes, and he wanted one more than anything. His mom said, "Well, better write to Santa." Sammy thought it over and decided to go over Santa's head, straight to Jesus, because he had learned from Sunday school that Jesus was the real decision-maker.

Sammy went to his room and wrote, "Dear Jesus, I have been a very, very good boy and would like a bike for Christmas." "That's not right," he thought, and he decided to try again with more humility and better manners. "Dear Jesus, I'm a good boy *most* of the time; please consider granting me a new bike for Christmas." He read it back, still not right. He thought, "Maybe I should make more of a case statement." "Dear Jesus, I could be such a good boy, and do so much good for others, if only I had a new bike: "Mmm, No." he thought.

Sammy decided to go out for a walk to help him think about a fresh approach. After a short time, he passed a house with a small concrete statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the front garden. He looked around, crept in, stuffed the statue under his coat, hurried home and hid it under his bed. Then he wrote this letter. "Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again, send new bike quick."

What do you want for Christmas? Maybe you would let go of all the sensory pleasures, all the most beautiful things, if you could have more human connection; maybe if you could have just one holiday gathering that does not unravel. Maybe you long for a relationship repaired.

For the last year, we have been praying for Jack and Diane Holzman's daughter and son-in-law, Katie & Gabe Benavides. More than anything Katie and Gabe have wanted a child in their home for a long, long time. A year ago they pivoted to the adoption process. And this last year held all the heart-breaking ups and downs of the process. And then finally, in October, they were chosen by a birth mother, and they took this little boy, Vincent, into their arms. But over the last 2 months, the ups and downs grew more intense as the birth mother (and father) went back and forth about whether they could let the child go, stuck, in surely one of the most difficult decisions anyone ever has to make. Well, a few days ago, by the grace of God, and by your prayers, and by the will of the mother (and father) to endure the loss and to let the child go, Katie and Gabe are now the official parents of this baby boy. And we can only imagine the Gaudete, the rejoicing, in that home.

What do you want for Christmas? One of the strange and difficult parts of being human is that we are often filled with so many intense and different desires, leading us in so many possible directions. We want so many things all at once. For example, in the season of Advent, many of us long for a simpler, quieter, more peaceful life. And at the same time we have all this creative, life-giving energy to do more things, bake more things, watch more things, buy more things.

Added to this, many of the desires of our hearts do not come from inside us. We learn them from other people. We often want things because we see other people want things. You see this easily in kids. A child in the nursery is playing with his little red dump truck and then another boy comes over and starts to get really excited about playing with the little blue race car and suddenly the kid with the dump truck is overcome with desire for the race car. Adults are not that different. We are highly influenced by the herd.

This means it's very important to be intentional about the company you keep, the community to which you belong. Because whether you like it or not, the herd, the pack, the community will shape what you want and therefore what you pursue.

I'm so grateful that we, as a local Christian community, and as a Church universal, gather on this day to recite this famous song of desire, *the Magnificat*, from Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary, likely around 15 years old, likely non-literate, likely poor, like the vast majority of the ancient world, Mary is surely a kind of prophet. The Prophets, down through the ages, are those in touch with what *God* wants, what *God desires*, and the prophets boldly, clearly articulate it for the rest of us.

The prophet Mary of Nazareth sings out, "*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things.*"

Notice how the verb tenses in the *Magnificat* signify that these things have already happened. He *has* lifted up the lowly. He *has* filled the hungry with good things. Prophets give us a vision of God's kingdom, that such a kingdom of peace and justice is possible, it is coming. This kingdom is breaking in, if we want it, if only we will move towards it. The prophet's vision inspires us not to give up hope, not to quit.

The sociologist, Matthew Desmond, is most famous for his book, *Evicted*, about the outsized effect the housing crisis is having on those who are poor. He has a new book called *Poverty, by America*, and he begins that book with the absurdity of how little progress we have made in the U.S. over the last 50 years on poverty, on lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things. Without such progress, it can be easy to close our hearts down, to extinguish the desire lest we be disappointed. But, as Desmond points out, there really are things that work, there really is much that can be done. If we collectively *want* it. If we *desire* it. I'm so grateful that this community tries to stoke that desire.

I was hosting one of these monthly Guy Gatherings week before last and Ed Inderrieden was at my discussion table, and he mentioned that he's been helping out on Wednesdays at the food pantry at our partner church, All Peoples. That comment planted a seed in me, because I am a herd animal, because my desires are shaped by your desires. So I thought, I'm going to stop by All Peoples on a Wednesday. And so I did. And there was Ed in his work gloves, standing by the cabinet of cereal. I also met their new interim pastor, Diane Olsen, who seems very sharp, very kind. And we were talking about the needs in the neighborhood, people waiting in long lines in the freezing cold for a bag of groceries. Many of them are working poor. It's just hard to pay rent and feed 4 people on \$15/hour, even if you're putting in 50 hours.

While we were talking, a very young woman and her 2 year old little girl came in and sat down at the intake table and the mother began to weep, and Pastor Diane went over. And I couldn't hear what they were talking about, but Pastor Diane held her very close and began praying for her. And the toddler was wiping away the tears from mom's eyes. And I thought, "What does that mother want for Christmas? What does she want for her daughter? I doubt she wants pity. I doubt she wants fancy academic rhetoric. I don't know, I had to leave, but maybe she hungers for dignity, for opportunity, for someone to help her uncover and affirm her gifts and the gifts which emerging from her child.

What do you want for Christmas? In the beautiful, complex tangle of human desire, can we help one another, encourage one another, to make Mary's song the song of our own hearts? For there is unimaginable rejoicing, overflowing Gaudete, waiting for us in the kingdom of Christ. How much do we want to get there?