***The Taste of Christmas***

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Hope: The First Saturday in Advent

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*“Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12. The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.” Romans 13:11-12*

Oh dear ones, who here is tired? Anyone simply exhausted? It’s supposed to be a holiday of gratitude, of hope, of blessing, but I for one, am plum tired. It’s been relentless, in the best possible way, but I need a time of slowing down.

Will you breathe with me? Susan McEwen in the office taught me the practice of square breathing. You breathe in for three. (breathe) hold for three. (hold) Exhale for three (exhale) and hold for three. I picture my breath and my diaphragm holding a square. It helps. Let’s do that one more time.

Who here went shopping yesterday or today or this past week? What did you see? What did you experience? What parts were wonderful? What parts broke your heart a little or a lot? This season, the season of Christmas is complicated. We are practicing and reflecting on the role of hope all week. We will have ready in the office tomorrow a little Advent Devotional book called “the Dawn Chorus: an Advent Devotional on the Wonders of Birds” by my friends over at the SALT Project. Our children and teens will be making ornaments out of each week’s birds, but if you are an adult and want to make ornaments, we will have more sheets that you can sign and we are going to laminate this week and next. What a lovely 2022 memory, it’s for the birds☺

In this week’s Advent candle lighting liturgy, Maren Tirabassi writes, “We light the one candle of hope, reminding ourselves we embrace a season that is different for each one of us. In John’s Gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus that we are each to be born again. Emmanuel, God be with us, in the week to come. Ignite hope, the most personal emotion there is, on the wick of each of our lives, so we find others. Amen.”

Ok, so we lit one candle for hope. We lit prayer candles, we remembered how much Jesus loves us for gathering once again at his table, the table where we remember, where all are invited, where no one will be rejected, where country of origin or native language doesn’t matter, where whether you are young or old, rich or poor, all are invited to feast at the table.

When we do Thanksgiving right, that’s also the best part of why we gather. We open our tables and share of our food with others. If we have more than enough, we cook with strangers and sit down at common tables at the Riverway Café or invite in neighbors and new friends so that our tables may be full. We also dine with others in hospitals, rehab centers, hospice homes and retirement homes. We remember Thanksgivings of the past and heat up meals on wheels and frozen pizzas, but whatever we did to be grateful on Thursday, it is now Saturday, and like it or not, the full Christmas press is upon us.

This year, Reed and I decided to do something a little different. Instead of preparing slowly, prayerfully and liturgically properly for Christmas through the season of Advent, we are leaping into the Christmas season with bells on and Christmas carols a singing. Why? Well, why miss the opportunity to teach of the meaning of that tiny 8 ½ lb. baby Jesus that everyone comes to hear about at 4:30 p.m. and 8:00p.m. on December 24th. This way, we can teach about it for four straight weeks and then we get Christmas Eve and Christmas Sunday morning. Some of you will take a pause and some will come religiously week after week, but let’s talk about hope and the taste of Christmas. I immediately thought of my favorite childhood Christmas book. I googled it and here’s the title: The Sweet Smell of Christmas: A Scratch and Sniff Story by Patricia Scarry. I loved this book with a sweet little Christmas Bear who loved Christmas cookies and live pine Christmas trees in the house.

Many of you have heard tales of my mom, Mother Meredith and let me tell you, she definitely did not buy this book. What nonsense is this; a scratch and sniff book about Christmas? It wasn’t literary, well-written or even worth reading aloud. I wonder if my sweet dad agreed in the children’s vault in the Old Stone Lion Bookstore in downtown Fort Collins to buy his little girl a sweet scratch and sniff book about Christmas. Lary liked to say yes to his little girl so I received special treatment as his favorite daughter, and perhaps, his favorite child. I think my dad read me that book a 100 times even though I was a great reader and didn’t need anyone to read it to me. I also liked to sit on the forced hot air grate in the bathroom with my flannel Lanz pajamas trying to get warm in the morning with my books hoping no one noticed I wasn’t moving very quickly. When both my parents were racing to get off to work and my brother had to ride his bike to school and I walked myself to elementary school, I could hide for quite a while in quiet corners in our small ranch house.

And so, I invite you to think about hope, hope in the darkness, hope in the dark, deep earth as the soil nurtures the seed as it germinates, hope in the dark part of your soul as you mature in the part where the world cannot see how you are transforming like a cocoon and then a chrysalis to become your next stage of life, a fully-formed butterfly. Hope, wherever it grows.

Perhaps it’s the hope of watching the leaves fall down and listening to the birds in the dense thicket calling to each other to either bed down to stay warm or hurry, hurry to warmer climates where there are more abundant insects and berries. Perhaps it’s the hope of baking cookies, all your favorite recipes that remind you of loved ones who are no longer alive and yet by the baking and eating you keep alive in your DNA and tastebuds the Christmas traditions of the old country.

I brought along today a Swedish Christmas cookie tree. This isn’t from my family. Although my mom was Swedish and a little Norwegian, that’s where her height came from. But