

**And the Darkness Shall
Not Overcome It:
Reflections on the Advent and
Christmas Readings Through
an LGBTQ Lens**



Dignity/Washington 2017-2018

Preface

I'll never forget picking up Colm Toibin's book of literary criticism, *Love in a Dark Time*. This lovely and often tragic book explores the writing lives of famously gay writers who suffered due to their sexuality. But even more than the insight of Toibin's prose, these days I just have a visceral connection to the title. These can feel like dark times indeed if you are an undocumented immigrant in America, or a transgender person serving in the military, or an unemployed factory worker in the Rust Belt, or a person of color who cannot seem to claw her way onto an equal footing with the rest of our prosperous nation, or even I think, if you are a white, heterosexual who just isn't sure what to make of all of these burgeoning identities crowding into your consciousness for the first time.

Our instinctive response to darkness is always fear, and fear is attached to that part of the brain that feeds our anger. We see that anger at every level of our national discourse – which then seems to feed the cycle of fear, and even more anger, and so on it goes. These can feel like dark days indeed.

It is precisely to help us see in moments of darkness – to stop the cycle of fear and anger – that faith is most essential. The Scriptures note that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18), and that in our darkest times, we need faith more than fear (Luke 8:50). And so it is through a faith grounded in our own lives that the community members of Dignity/Washington once again seek to share the light and love of Jesus. We want to share **“And the Darkness Shall Not Overcome It: Reflections on the Advent and Christmas Readings Through an LGBTQ Lens,”** not because we have suffered more than others, but rather in the hopes that by sharing our experience of the Light which darkness cannot overcome we will find with any person of faith a common experience of gratitude and a shared journey of trust. We offer these reflections – not on darkness, but rather, on the Light which overcomes it – because we believe our particular experience sheds light on a universal love. A love whose fulfillment we await and for which we prepare, but also a love that is always and already with us, nearer to us than our own breath, made flesh in Jesus – and through Jesus in every single atom – and person – in our universe. Whatever else might make us different, it is our fundamental “lovedness” that makes us one. And in the end, it is that love – shining in the light of Christ – that we believe cannot be overcome.

– Jeff Vomund

Chair Dignity/Washington Liturgy Committee

December 3, 2017; First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b, 64:2-7; Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:33-37

In the Gospel reading for this first Sunday of Advent, Mark recounts how Jesus urgently tells his disciples to be watchful and alert. Reminding them that they know neither the day nor the hour when God is coming, Jesus emphasizes that they for sure do not want to be caught dozing when the moment of truth arrives! His exhortation makes sense all by itself, but in light of today's readings from Isaiah, the Psalms, and Paul's letter to the Corinthians, it takes on even greater urgency and depth of meaning for me.

Biblical scholars tell us that the book of the prophet Isaiah was written by many different authors and describes events that took place over a span of more than a century. The context for today's Isaiah reading is a period near the end of the Israelites' extended captivity in Babylon. The people are worn down and the memory of the awesome deeds Yahweh has worked on their behalf has faded. Though they may still outwardly follow Yahweh's commandments, their hearts are not in it; they have lost any real sense of Yahweh as their ever-present companion, who entered into a sacred covenant with them of mutual love and faithfulness. The author of this passage laments that Yahweh has seemingly given the Israelites over to their forgetfulness and hardness of heart. And yet despite all of this, at the same time he reaffirms that the Israelites are the work of Yahweh's hands; they are the clay and Yahweh the potter who continues faithfully to shape and form them.

The Psalmist's prayer affirms our utter reliance on God's grace just to remain in right relationship with God. After opening with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving, the Psalmist immediately acknowledges Israel's desperate need to be reawakened to the recognition of God's ever-saving presence, pleading with God to come and save us, so that "we will no more withdraw from you;" and to "give us new life, and we will call upon your name." The Psalm declares that only God can save us, by giving us the capacity to believe in God's presence, to call upon it, to rely on it, and to continuously draw life from it in everything we do.

When worshipping with my fellow believers in the LGBTQ community at Dignity, at times I feel deep wonder and gratitude. I see that we are people, who through our experiences of being misunderstood, rejected, maligned, and cast out in various ways and times in our lives, have allowed these events to awaken us to the God of radical acceptance, mercy, and unconditional love present in our lives. What a miracle! I see that as we let ourselves awaken and believe, we are moved to reach out to one another in and beyond this community of care to let God's own love flow in and through us to heal and be healed. God transforms the rejection we each have experienced into radical acceptance, a gift that we are blessed, by God's grace, to continue giving to those who come into our lives.

—Kathleen B-R.

December 4, 2017; Monday of the First Week of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122:1-2, 3-4b, 4cd-5, 6-7, 8-9; Matthew 8:5-11

We live in the house of the Lord. Popular culture makes us think that the Lord's house exists in some far-off place beyond the stars in the clouds, and the heavens; a place that is temporally reserved for the future. But we reside with God now, and God resides with us in the present. We live in communion with all of our sisters and brothers in this world – this room – in God's house. Thus, our opportunity to recline at the banquet in the Kingdom of heaven – like that of the centurion – exists now because we are all children of God.

We are exhorted to live in God's ways by beating our "swords into plowshares." We are to live in harmony by choosing peace and avoiding conflict, by using instruments of violence for nurturing and nourishing others. In today's world, we have little chance, as individuals, to turn weapons of war into instruments of peace. However, many times throughout each day we have the power and ability to turn away from discord and acrimony to sow love, kindness, charity, and understanding. Our words, deeds, actions, and inactions have the power to heal or to harm.

The strife that we encounter daily, from small, personal difficulties to larger tensions enveloping our nation and our world, can seem overwhelming. And, while our ability to positively influence global issues of peace may be limited, we are not powerless. Each of us can, individually, in our own personal way, move the world from hurtful to helpful and through faith and love bring peace. We may not be the Master of the Lord's house, but we do live in it with all of God's children. This Advent we prepare to welcome our God into this home, our only home for now, our earth, and we claim it all as God's dwelling – even as we reflect on how we can be a bit better roommate to all of those who share this dwelling with us.

—Bernie D.

December 5, 2017; Tuesday of the First Week of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17; Luke 10:21-24

God gives us new life. “A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.”

Birth occurs in many different ways – not just when water breaks, labor ceases and a baby cries. That’s particularly true for people who don’t identify as straight. Coming out or being outed requires a birthing process. The expectations of others can obscure God’s fabulous creations’ true selves. A closet, in many ways, acts like a womb. We emerge from it to enter a brave new world, reborn as the person God created us to be, not the person that others may expect.

Those expectations have led some Biblical scholars and religious leaders to attempt to convince us that we are abominations rather than fabulous creations. But I believe that the Spirit of the Lord, indeed, rests upon us. After all, God has given us a Spirit of wisdom and understanding as well as a Spirit of counsel and strength in the face of discrimination, rejection and violence. And, God has, indeed, judged us with justice. Even as people banished us from A church, God reminded us that we belonged in THE church by finding us new houses of worship. God wears that band of justice well and has been faithful to us, even through the sadness of discrimination and the sorrow of an epidemic. God continues to wear that band of justice well as we endure slings and arrows from enemies, when we are called to care for one another like brothers and sisters. May God bring us together. Led by a little child, may the calf and lion browse together. Let justice and peace flourish forever. God has given us all we need to be just and live in peace – God’s own presence, in the person and spirit of Jesus the Christ. For he is love and peace. This Advent, may we be born anew, by giving birth to Jesus’ love again and again in our lives. Amen.

— *Jason W.*

December 6, 2017; Wednesday of the First Week of Advent

Isaiah 25:6-10a; Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6; Matthew 15:29-37

When I was in the seminary, I had to take two semesters of Greek so that I would have a basic understanding of the language in which the New Testament was written. I remember one lesson in which the professor was working with us, and it happened to be the one in today's Gospel. When we came to a particular word, I felt like I had been punched in the gut.

That word was σπλαγχνίζομαι, transliterated as *splagchnizomai*, and pronounced *splang-NID-zo-my*. We find it in today's Gospel where we read that Jesus was "moved with pity" when he saw the crowds. Other translations may say he was "moved with compassion." However, being moved with pity or compassion are both inadequate English phrases to describe what the word means in its original Greek. It isn't just "to be moved to with pity or compassion"; it is "to be moved so deeply that you feel it in your entrails." My professor said a better translation would be that Jesus' "guts were in an uproar" or that he "was affected so strongly, he almost threw up." The word is used several times in the Gospels to describe a feeling in Jesus that moves him so strongly that he takes some kind of action. In this particular passage, he is so moved by the hunger of the crowd – it has been three days since they've eaten. Feeling it in his gut, he knows he must do something, and so he feeds them.

Have we ever felt this kind of compassion? I think the first time I ever sat and really listened to a transgendered person tell their story, without interruption or judgement, I felt it in my gut. I thought my own coming out as gay had its struggles, but this person opened my eyes to the unique and sometimes painful journey of a transgendered person. I think that's the kind of compassion Jesus is modeling and that we are also called to feel. When we see another person's pain and suffering, it's not that we should just intellectually understand that this person is in pain; we should feel that pain in our gut. It should move our entrails so strongly that we have to act.

— *Mike O.*

December 7, 2017; Thursday of the First Week of Advent

Isaiah 26:1-6; Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 19-21, 25-27a; Matthew 7:21, 24-27

Trust! Today we are called to trust in our God, not in men (or women) or princes. In fact, those in high places will be trampled by the needy and the poor. Well! That refuge is certainly a comforting promise as we contemplate certain political leaders today. “In God We Trust” – it’s on the money. It’s also said, “In God we trust; everyone else pays cash!” Or, how about “Trust, but verify.” In other words, trust is not an excuse for idly sitting by and expecting God to do something. The one who builds their house on solid ground will prevail against the floods and winds. But here we are in the waning of the year 2017 and there is not enough room on the front page of our newspapers for the stories of hurricane winds and flooding, of earthquakes, wildfires and gun violence. To be blunt – our trust in God is a little frayed this year. Where is our eternal rock? Where is the solid rock on which to build our house?

Let’s recall Elijah alone on the mountain who found that God was not in the great wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire. But God came to him in a tiny whisper (or in sheer silence, as another translation says it). Then there is the story of the person who received an alert of an impending flood and trusting in God, went to his roof top to wait it out. The flood came and a boat came by to rescue him and he said he would stay – and trust in God; then a helicopter came to lift him off and he said again he would wait and trust in God. Well, he finally drowned and went to heaven and berated God in whom he trusted for not saving him. And God said: How many times did you want me to send help?

So where do we find the fruit of our trust in God? The Scripture tells us it is in a nation that is just, faithful and of firm purpose. A nation built on solid ground. And by nation we have to know that it means not just a political entity, but it also means people, a community of people who do justice for one another. We are each called to do God’s work in creating a just, faithful, and purposeful community. We trust that God helps us to do just that every step of the way – and to the extent we are deficient, our trust in God is lacking.

— *Bob M.*

December 8, 2017; The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Psalm 98:1, 2-3ab, 3cd-4; Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38

On this day in the season of Advent, we celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On this important Feast Day, we remember God's choice of Mary to be the mother of Jesus. In the reading from Ephesians and then again in the Annunciation presented in the Gospel of Luke, I was struck by the theme of "choice." The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians greets them with a blessing and then reminds them that God has chosen them to be holy and without blemish. In the Gospel of Luke, the angel announces to Mary, God's choice for her to become the Mother of Jesus. God's gift to us of free will allows us to make choices in our lives. God's hope is that we will make choices that are in line with God's purpose for our lives and for the world.

In my coming out as a gay man, I have often been reminded about choice. Some have proclaimed, in ignorance, that we as LGBTQ persons have a choice about our sexuality. In my coming out process, I have often thought and shared with others that if I had a choice about my sexuality, I most certainly would have chosen to be straight, where I would have been easily accepted by others and not had to struggle with my own homophobia and the fear of being found out. Gratefully, the attitude that gayness is a choice is slowly diminishing as we have learned that our sexuality is a natural part of human nature, and I believe, an attribute God has chosen for us. The only choice we have made as out LGBTQ persons is the choice to accept ourselves as we are and announce it proudly to the world without shame or blemish.

God is asking us, not only within our sexuality, but also in our relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters, to respond to God's annunciation in our lives. We, like Mary, have a choice to respond with faith and faithfulness, as Christ is born anew in us.

May God, who offers us an abundance of grace, mercy, and forgiveness through Our Lord Jesus Christ, help us to live a grace-filled life as Mary did, by believing in God's promises and by giving God our unwavering "yes" to God's will and plan for our lives.

— *Chris S.*

December 9, 2017; Saturday of the First Week of Advent

Isaiah 30:19-21, 23-26; Psalm 1:47:1-2, 3-4, 5-6; Matthew 9:35-10:1, 5a, 6-8

In the reading from Isaiah we encounter a God who fulfills Israel's every need, providing "the bread that you need and the water for which you thirst." This is a God moved by pity and compassion, promising to His people "no more will you weep." God "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." Following up on this theme in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives us a very powerful command, "without cost you have received; without cost you are to give." The God of abundant gifts is telling us that we are to do likewise. What kind of gifts is Jesus asking us to give in this season of gift giving? With the unrelenting string of natural disasters lately, forest fires, hurricanes, and earthquakes, there is no shortage of opportunities to imitate Jesus' generosity by binding up the wounds of God's people with tangible gifts and just as importantly, with our spiritual support through prayer.

Yet I feel that Jesus is asking us to give a more intimate gift to each other, the gift of our true selves. Unfortunately, we as LGBTQ people are perceived by some as stereotypically self-centered, hedonistic, shallow or vain. This perception may even exist in our own families. They may not accept our authentic selves because they believe that Jesus rejects us and our sexuality. Imitating Jesus' compassion, by offering a kind word or deed, a compliment, or a sympathetic ear, makes it more difficult for people to persist in their negative perceptions of who we are. Much of the progress that we as LGBTQ people have made in our society in recent years has resulted from coming out as our authentic selves – good people following the example of Christ's life of kindness, gentleness, and giving without counting the cost.

A second passage in the first reading intrigued and struck a chord in me. "God will be gracious to you when you cry out, as soon as God hears God will answer you." On more than one occasion I have felt that God turned a deaf ear to my plea when there was no instant answer to my prayer. Could it be that in this age of immediate gratification that we are too impatient to wait for God's answer or too self-absorbed to hear God's reply? God is so very patient with us, forgiving us constantly for our selfishness and self-centeredness. How patient are we with God? Could it be that God's answer in the silence that we hear is "No"?, or that the time is not yet right to grant our request or that God has something much better in mind for us? We are called to trust in God's love. Patience is not an easy virtue to practice. For me, Advent provides an opportunity to prepare for Christ by practicing the virtue of patience.

In this season of Advent my wish for all my brothers and sisters is that it be a time of patience with ourselves, with God and with each other; that it be a season of spiritual quietness so that we are open and able to hear the voice of God. May it also be a season of gifting others with our genuine selves, with acts of kindness and compassion, just as God has shown us in the gift of Jesus all without counting the cost.

— Dave O.

December 10, 2017; Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Psalm 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14; 2 Peter 3:8-14; Mark 1:1-8

As a teacher, I feel like I spend much of my life preparing. Truly, getting ready to teach can be more exhausting than the actual teaching. And with all of that work, the class may turn out just as I'd hoped, but it also may be a washout. Perhaps because I've missed something, or just because some of my students aren't in a space to learn as I'd planned to teach that day. Class preparation is the core of a teacher's work. For me, it can be arduous and painstaking - all with no guarantee of success. It is an act of hope for my classroom and an act of trust in my students.

In today's readings from Isaiah and Mark, a voice cries out to us from the desert that we prepare: "Prepare the way of the Lord." Like in my classroom, this preparation can be difficult and require courage. It is always an act of trust. Isaiah calls to a people in the desert (and to us) to prepare so that the glory of the Lord can be revealed. In Mark's gospel, John the Baptist prepares for Jesus' coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Each Advent season, I am struck by the call to prepare myself for the celebration of the incarnation of God. Like all preparation, this can be difficult and painful work, and it is always an act of trust.

I was almost 50 years old when I came out as a gay man. I had lived for over thirty-five years realizing that I felt different from others. In time, I came to realize that I was gay and my experience of life was different from some of my family members and friends. Throughout this time, I kept my sexual orientation to myself and struggled with it because I was afraid that people might treat me differently or outright reject me. Throughout my lengthy coming out process people along the way helped me prepare to accept my homosexuality and live my life publicly as a gay man.

The people who called out to me and prepared me to accept myself as God created me were former students, my mom and my brother, Paul. When I taught moral theology, my students posed challenging questions in class that caused me to reflect on how I saw myself living within the world. When my brother, Paul, came out as a gay in his 20s, my mom became an activist on behalf of the gay community. She worked diligently to encourage people to live their truth as gay men and women within our society. I have always been in awe of my brother, Paul, living honestly and openly. Just as John the Baptist prepared people for the coming of Jesus, these simple acts of integrity prepared me to live openly the way God has been made flesh in me. In living an authentic and faith-filled life, I believe that I am preparing to welcome Jesus into my heart daily, and helping others do the same. It can be arduous and painstaking work. Who prepared you to embrace your sexuality? How might you help others to embrace their authentic selves? How do you help to prepare people to welcome Jesus into their hearts each day? Often the answers to these questions are found in the way we live out our own integrity each day. This can be difficult work that requires a great deal of faith in ourselves and in our brothers and sisters. But as a teacher, I can tell you that being prepared is always worth the effort.

— Patrick C.

December 11, 2017; Monday of the Second Week of Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 85:9ab and 10, 11-12, 13-14; Luke 5:17-26

As I read the great prophet Isaiah, his message resonated with me living so many centuries after him. He reaffirmed his inherited, monotheistic faith at a time when the allure of countless belief systems, religious and otherwise, was rampant and skepticism was fashionable, much as they are today. In soaring poetic language, as in this passage, Isaiah championed the sovereignty and central role that God could have in the lives of his fellow citizens and for the nation as a whole. Always the realist in the face of danger or threat, he sought to spark hope and encouragement when he spoke about the power and goodness of God to save and protect, and to redeem and restore. Thankfully for you and me, his sublime and lofty oratory was recorded and preserved and other prophets after him followed in his footsteps.

So did Jesus as in the gospel reading today. Was not curing a paralytic a sign that God had come to save us through the Messiah and restore the Kingdom, to tear down all walls of mistrust and division? “Behold the king will come, the Lord of the earth, and he himself will lift the yoke of our captivity,” says our Gospel verse.

As a gay man, I long for that dialogue and relationship of “respect, compassion and sensitivity” that James Martin is calling for between the LGBTQ community and the Roman Catholic Church, and which, sadly, we have not yet realized. Like so many other Americans, I yearn for that “Beloved Community,” dreamed of by Martin Luther King, Jr., to include all the marginalized and the under-represented and poorly-served in this country. I want to support and promote the work of Krzysztof Charamsa, and so many others on the world stage, who work to expose hypocrisy and greed.

I let Isaiah and Jesus speak to me with their compelling moral authority and great faith. They call me to live my truth and to grow into the man that God wants me to become. Their message is a great treasure that keeps me focused on what is lasting and true ... and always renews my hope.

— Henry H.

December 12, 2017; Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe/ Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe

Zechariah 2:14-17; or Revelation 11:19a, 12:1-6a, 10ab; Judith 13:18bcde, 19; Luke 1:39-47

On this day in 1531 (also a Tuesday), Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin (canonized: 2002) was intercepted on a mission of mercy to his dying uncle by a vision of a woman who identified herself as the “Mother of the Very True Deity,” whom he had met three times previously. In response to his troubles, she indicated that his uncle had recovered, and directed him to collect out-of-season, foreign roses from a barren hilltop called Tepeyac. She arranged them in his tilma (cloak), and sent him, once again, to visit the Archbishop who had already disbelieved Juan Diego twice, asking for a “sign” prior to granting the lady’s request to erect a church on the site. This time, when Juan opened his cloak, spilling forth the roses, the Archbishop was astonished by the image emblazoned on the tilma and claimed it for himself. On December 26, 1531, the tilma was carried in procession to a hastily-erected chapel on the hill, and has been enshrined at the basilica ever since. Church authorities repeatedly challenged the validity of the image and story, even to this day. But in 1895, Pope Leo XIII granted Canonical Coronation to the event. Pius X named our Lady of Guadalupe “Patroness of Latin America” in 1910, and John XXIII invoked her as “Mother of the Americas” in 1961.

The image is of a woman of Aztec descent cloaked in a mantel of blue emblazoned by 8-pointed stars, standing on a crescent moon, and surrounded by rays, like the sun, not unlike Revelation’s description. When she spoke with Juan Diego, she used his native Nahuatl tongue, which was the language of the Aztec Empire, conquered just a decade prior to the Apparition. The Spanish authorities, civil and religious, had great difficulty crediting that Natives were co-equal with Europeans, and were fearful that the image would inspire revolt and reversion to “pagan religions” and practices. The image has become a beloved symbol of Mexico and often accompanied independence uprisings.

It is easy to become discouraged by the seemingly endless avoidance of dialogue and denial of experience by Roman Catholic authorities toward the LGBTQ population. Here, the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe offers hope. Church authorities did not want to believe that Our Lady would appear to a native (non-European), that she would speak in a local tongue, that she would look like an Aztec. Similarly, even today, church leaders do not want to acknowledge a language for love that is different than their own. They do not want to accept that revelation can occur outside of their particular understanding and experience. But Our Lady of Guadalupe reminds us all that G-d continues to speak from outside the halls of human power; that G-d’s love is not contained by human arrogance; and mostly that G-d’s grace will eventually triumph over the bigotries that attempt to stifle it.

— Dan H.

December 13, 2017; Wednesday of the Second Week of Advent

Isaiah 40:25-31; Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 8 and 10; Matthew 11:28-30

Saint Lucy, whose feast day is today, was a third century maverick, living on the margins. She wasn't marginalized in the way we think of now – poor or disabled or LGBTQ. No. It's just that she was a devoted Christian when Christianity was still illegal. Born into a wealthy family in Sicily, she was promised by her mother to a young man along with a handsome dowry. The fiancé was mesmerized by her beautiful eyes. But she didn't like the guy – disliked him so much, according to the tradition, that she gouged her eyes out so he would forget about her. Instead, he turned her in to the authorities for practicing our faith. She was arrested and executed, but not before making her mother promise to distribute her dowry to the poor.

Now that's some saint! Her legacy is to be the patron saint of all things ocular: blindness, of course, but also light, which is what the name Lucy means.

Today's readings fit well with Lucy's unshakable faith. I especially like the passage in Isaiah where we are urged to look to the stars and notice that not a single one is missing, that God commands them like an army and calls each by name. What a mighty image of the Creator!

The Isaiah passage is sometimes referred to as the “gospel of the exile,” because it is said to be set at the time of the Babylonian exile. We are repeatedly reminded that no matter how desperate or miserable our situation, God will never abandon us. God will renew our spirit like the mythological eagle that every 10 years flew too close to the sun and dropped to the sea, only to molt and grow a complete new set of feathers to take him into the sky again.

Matthew's gospel reinforces this theme of God's dependability. What king or president would say, “Come to me,” as Jesus did so casually and sincerely. Jesus wants his followers to realize that the new yoke he's asking us to bear is a lot less of a burden than the Law – and that we never have to bear that yoke without God's great love shouldering some (most?) of the burden!

— *Mark C.*

December 14, 2017; Thursday of the Second Week of Advent

Isaiah 41:13-20; Psalm 145:1 and 9, 10-11, 12-13ab; Matthew 11:11-15

I usually look to the New Testament rather than the Old Testament reading for inspiration and understanding but not today.

Today's reading from the prophet Isaiah is full of ancient Hebrew poetic imagery. "I am the Lord, your God, who grasp your right hand." The image is of a Parent holding the hand of a child. It is a tender image of leading, teaching, protecting, caring, trusting, security and love. I remember holding my own father's hand as we crossed a street together. I felt so safe and cared for. I feel sorry for anyone who never experienced such a moment in childhood. Isaiah goes on, "It is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.'" To the "afflicted and the needy," God promises answers and that they are not forsaken. This is an image of a loving Parent caring for a beloved child.

When I "came out", later in life than most, it was during a period of sudden loss and grief. My sons had grown and had gone off to make lives of their own when I suddenly lost my wife. The life I had known was gone and I was faced with starting anew with only the ashes of an old life ...and a God who was holding my right hand. The self-recognition that I was also gay, I thought was a "horrible" truth. Looking back, I see now that God had my hand firmly grasped and together we set out on a journey hand in hand. I did not have the slightest idea where we were going. I was afraid, lonely and apprehensive. But slowly, I recognized that God was leading me on and I began to trust more and more. God led me to a new life, a happy one again. This is our God, my God, leading each of us by the hand toward happiness ...and heaven.

—*Jim S.*

December 15, 2017; Friday of the Second Week of Advent

Isaiah 48:17-19; Psalm 1:1-2, 3, 4 and 6; Matthew 11:16-19

This fragment from the gospel makes little sense on its own. Even today, biblical scholars debate the meaning of the passage, with its unusual reference to children playing and the consumption of food and drink.

Matthew's chapter 11 itself is a work of contrast, with changing tones of praise and condemnation in the course of its 30 verses. Jesus starts holding up John the Baptist as a model. John is now imprisoned, so there a symbolic handover of ministry is taking place, from John to Jesus.

The two men differ in various ways, but both face a public backlash of resistance and criticism. Jesus compares this reaction to childish bickering in the marketplace. Rather than hearing what the messenger has to say, people find fault with the details: with ritual observance (fasting, or the lack of it) and with the company of those who fall outside the social norms (tax collectors and sinners).

Notice how these two items are paired together. In this Gospel – and throughout his ministry – Jesus warns listeners that observing religious rituals is no substitute for the practice of faith. They are not the same thing. The real test of that faith – and how we will be judged – is on the love we show to others, and how much we exert ourselves to be inclusive in that love.

—*Joe O.*

December 16, 2017; Saturday of the Second Week of Advent

Sirach 48:1-4, 9-11; Psalm 80:2ac and 3b, 15-16, 18-19; Lk 3:4,6;

Matthew 17:9a,10-13.

The LGBTQ Community as a Prophetic Sacrament of Grace

In the readings today, we learn of the power of the Word through Elijah, as the precursor of John and Jesus, who had the power to bring down fire on creation and reestablish the tribes of Jacob and restore all things. The power of the Word protects the Vine, prepares the way of the Lord and gives life.

We—as an LGBTQ People—are prophetic conduits of grace to the People of God and the Church. Just as Jesus and John were not only not recognized, they were also persecuted, can we expect less? It would seem that our vocation is to help the institutional Church renew itself, stripping it of the non-essentials that create barriers to the mediation of grace through intimate and loving relationships. By living our lives with integrity and affirming who we are, we restore what Jesus intended—the healthy vine that his/her Church was meant to be.

As a white male lawyer and former cleric, I was treated by society as if I were on top of the “pecking order.” Coming out as a gay man placed me in society’s eyes at the opposite end of the spectrum. “Humpty Dumpty” had a great fall, but did not break!

Now I am challenged to be my real self, to be closer to all my fellow human beings, without pretenses. This allows the Word that flows through Elijah, John, and Jesus to flow through me, at times unadulterated, when I remove sinful blockages, to reach its loving embrace of those around me as well as provide a healing presence. We are sacraments of grace to each other. Through Dignity and the newly formed Committee on the Church, I hope to reach out with my prophetic brothers and sisters in Dignity to the institutional church and to “reestablish it into the tribes of Jacob” so that “all things may be restored” according to the plan of salvation. However, I am under no illusion that we will avoid suffering. We will have to endure what the “Son of Man suffer(ed) at their hands.” However, as a people of faith, we know that it doesn’t end there, but in the joy of being empowered to realize our full lives in the gratuity of grace.

— *Pierre B.*

December 17, 2017; Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61: 1-2a, 10-11; Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54; Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1: 6-8, 19-28

The scripture readings for this day speak of compassion, empathy, salvation, justice, gratitude and humility. Isaiah announces that God has empowered him to reach out to the poor, the brokenhearted, prisoners, and captives. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians instructs them to pray, give thanks, rejoice and "retain what is good." John recounts the meeting of the Jewish priests and Levites with John the Baptist, who informs them that he is neither Christ nor a prophet but was merely sent by God to prepare the people for the coming of Christ.

I feel that I have learned much about myself, and the person I want to be, in the last several years, aided by my experience with Dignity and my gender transition. My volunteer assignments with Global Volunteers to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Cuba, Costa Rica and Appalachia have opened my eyes to how people live in simple ways with few material possessions but strong spiritual and/or religious faith. In some ways, like John the Baptist, I am a pioneer in my volunteer efforts representing the transgender community. My participation in Dignity/Washington's reflective series on compassion and mindfulness has also caused me to think broadly of my fellow citizens of the world and to try to see the world from their eyes. I am grateful for the blessings bestowed on me and have been actively sharing my gifts with a large number of charities covering a wide range of beneficial causes on behalf of society worldwide. I devote my time, treasure, and whatever talent I may possess to these initiatives while focusing on being humble and kind in sharing my good fortune.

I wonder how any of us might prepare ourselves and our world for the coming of Christ by sharing our gifts a bit more generously this Advent season? I wonder where our individual lights might be most needed to shine? I have been blessed to share my light as a transgender woman throughout all parts of the world in the past several years, and through that sharing, I feel the Source of my light shining ever-brighter in me. Nothing has helped me overcome the darkness in my life more than choosing to share the light that I've been given.

— *Linda R.*

December 18, 2017; Monday of the Third Week of Advent

Jeremiah 23:5-8; Psalm 72:1-2, 12-13, 18-19; Matthew 1:18-25

Fear is such an incredibly powerful emotion. It can incapacitate us; it can lead us to act irrationally; it can make us question our own worth. We might become so afraid that we forget our own abilities and fail to be the authentic people we are called to be. Do LGBTQ individuals face more fear in their lives than others? Probably. Certainly there is greater opportunity in the family, in the workplace, or in society in general for us to fear being outed and the dangers that would come from that – even in today's world.

Mary and Joseph in their own ways had to face fear and decide how to proceed. Matthew's Gospel reading today tells about the pregnancy of Mary through Joseph's eyes. Clearly when hearing that Mary was with child, he was filled with fear – fear that the woman he was to marry might create a scandal in his life, and she might even have to be killed. Joseph must have been shaken to the core. Then an angel appears and tells him not to be afraid. His fears are allayed and he is able to go about his life with Mary and Jesus. If only life were that easy for the rest of us and angels spoke in our dreams.

As LGBTQ individuals, we need to be our own angel (or allow other voices to be the angel for us) – speaking to our own hearts and allaying our own fears so that we can know with everyone else that God is always with us. We must have the strength and certainty of Jeremiah who declares in the first reading that Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell in security (even though things don't look that good for them at the moment!). Life is full of occasions when fear takes hold. Let us pray today for the strength to always reject fear so that we can hold true to our authentic selves.

— *Jake Hudson*

December 19, 2017; Tuesday of the Third Week of Advent

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25a; Psalm 71:3-4a, 5-6ab, 16-17; Luke 1:5-25

When I first reviewed my readings the first thing that came to my mind was a dear old friend, Floyd: a gay man, a preacher's kid, talented performer, dedicated educator, a husband and a father. How - you might wonder - are the stories of Manoah and his wife and Zechariah and Elizabeth remotely tied to my friend's journey?

These two couples had not been given the gift of children after many years of hoping. The prospects were dim. This was also Floyd's story. He came out in the 80's, and he had always wanted to be a dad. The chances of that happening at that time were very slim, but still Floyd hoped. He moved to New York City after college to pursue his career in theatre, and in 1988 he met his partner, Carlos. Things were good, but Floyd still held out hope for a child.

They returned to Maryland in 1993 and were asked to foster a four year-old boy, Keott. In 1998, they were asked to foster another young child, Dylan. This arrangement was hardly the norm in the 90's, and these two little gifts faced challenges of their own besides. But the family persevered. The boys were ultimately adopted and friends and loved ones watched this special family grow and mature in years and love. It was the best thing in the world to watch. Then in 2013 - 25 years after they became partners - their partnership finally received the legal validation it deserved in the District of Columbia. And who stood by Floyd's and Carlos' sides in church? Their two grown children, Keott and Dylan.

For so many years, we in the LGBTQ community were thought to be "barren," unworthy of the joys and struggles of a family. But, like Manoah and his wife, as well as Zechariah and Elizabeth - at least for Floyd, Carlos, Keott and Dylan - the call to become a family was "fulfilled in [its] proper time."

— *Kevin T.*

December 20, 2017; Wednesday of the Third Week of Advent

Isaiah 7: 10-14; Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4ab, 5-6; Luke 1:26-38

In these readings, I find three searching questions posed over multiple centuries as well as their startling answers.

Question 1: “Is it not enough for you to weary men, must you also weary my God?”

Are we not a tiresome lot, always complaining, questioning, demanding – so dissatisfied with our peculiar lives? For my part I have no trouble answering “yes” to this malcontented question. While I know I must weary God with my constant requests, I can forget Isaiah’s rebuke and his stunning prophecy in response to the wearisome King Ahaz: “The Virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall name him Emmanuel.” It turns out, according to Isaiah’s prophecy in the 8th century BCE, that God is not wearied by our requests, but rather waiting, for the fullness of time to reveal Jesus to us through those very requests.

Question 2: “Who can ascend the mounting of the Lord? Or who can stand in this holy place? The one whose hands are sinless, whose heart is clean, who desires not what is vain.”

Who is this sinless one that the Psalmist calls upon? As people of Christian faith, we believe that this verse foretells Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ who is to come into the world as our Savior. In fact, in the Psalm response, we are asked to repeat no less than four times the urgent command, “Let the Lord enter, the King of Glory.” Is this not the call of Advent in a phrase? Our crying out for a Savior to enter the world and be among us?

But what moves me most in this psalm is its final section where the “sinless” one “whose heart is clean” is addressed as, “O Key of David.” What a rich and multi-faceted analogy, beautifully wrapped up in that expression! “The Key” is a symbol of authority and power, a decisive instrument of both inflexible control and joyful liberation. Here, the Psalmist ends with the awe-inspiring image: the victorious opening of the Gates of God’s Eternal Kingdom and the freeing of the prisoners of darkness. Jesus comes to free us from our darkness, and it expresses the longing of so many men and women over the centuries who have cried out against the injustices of our world. Can our four weeks of Advent admit that liberating “Key” into our midst? Can we let that spirit, foretold by Isaiah, be our salvation from darkness?

Question 3: How can this be, since I have no relations with a man? And the angel said to her in reply, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

Shall we be like Mary when told of God’s plan for ourselves? Shall we say with her: “May it be done unto me according to your word.”? The waiting is over. The Gates are open. The decision is yours – and mine. Because Emmanuel, the sinless one, the Key, has come to us.

—*Thomas H.*

December 21, 2017; Thursday of the Third Week of Advent

Song of Songs 2:8-14; Psalm 33:2-3, 11-12, 20-21; Luke 1:39-45

Lust, extravagant love and unbridled joy. These themes run through the reading from the Song of Songs. The text begins with the woman describing her beloved as a gazelle or a young stag leaping over the mountain. Then the man speaks, “Arise my love, my fair one and come away.” The Song has an erotic and romantic nature. Is this Sacred Scripture? How can it have a place in the Bible?

The first word in this reading asks the reader to hark...to listen so that by listening we might understand the message of this passage. This text is about the relationship of a man and a woman. While it is obvious they share a mutual passion for each other, I also believe it is about fidelity, respect and longing for a lover's presence. It is a celebration of human love and joy.

I think most people want to love and to be loved. It doesn't matter if you are gay or straight. Since the legalization of same sex marriage, LGBTQ people can now publicly express their mutual love, fidelity and respect. These characteristics are both human and spiritual. Two sides of the same coin which coexist in love.

This text is also about divine love which is the relationship between God and God's people. I'd like to describe it as an extravagant love that is faithful, constant and unchanging. In the gospel, Elizabeth experiences just this kind of extravagant love. She hears Mary's greeting and knows God's presence in those words; but more than that, she experiences that extravagant love in her own body as “the infant leapt in her womb.” And in this listening Elizabeth encountered God.

When I began my first clinical pastoral education unit (CPE), the instructor told us that CPE is a ministry of presence. I learned, very fast, being with patients is all about listening. Listening well is hard work. It means focusing less on myself and more on the person in front of me. What a challenge! Listening is about the words, spoken and unspoken, the body language, getting to the meaning of the story, and recognizing the sacred in it all. Listening begins with mutual respect and a shared sense of one another's dignity.

After just this kind of listening, Elizabeth proclaims that Mary is blessed because she is carrying the presence of God. Like Mary and Elizabeth, our daily encounters are an opportunity to bring the presence of God to one another. An opportunity to express extravagant love and joy.

— *Denis P.*

December 22, 2017; Friday of the Third Week of Advent

1 Samuel 1:24-28; 1 Samuel 2:1, 4-5, 6-7, 8abcd; Luke 1:46-56

As I read the readings for today, I was struck by the fact that they tell the tale of two amazing, holy women who were overjoyed at the birth of their sons.

Hannah, the beloved wife of Elkanah, was barren or so everyone assumed. One day she went to the tabernacle at Shiloh and prayed to God for a son. There the high priest Eli took pity on her, blessed her and prophesied that God would indeed answer her prayer. Hannah, filled with joy, vowed that, in return, she would give her son back to God. Sure enough, she returned home and soon delivered her new son, whom she named Samuel - which literally means: God Hears. Being true to her promise, once Samuel was weaned, Hannah returned to the temple and presented her son for service to the Lord. Her hymn of thanksgiving is captured in today's responsorial psalm where she exults in the Lord and praises God's mighty power. Samuel, as we know, grew to be one of Israel's great prophets who helped establish the monarchy, first anointing Saul, and then David.

The Gospel captures the moment that the young childless and husbandless Mary conceives her Son, Jesus, the Messiah, the true King of Israel. Her beautiful Magnificat echoes Hannah's hymn, and hints that she too will one day give her son back to God for the redemption of us all.

"...He has come to the help of His servant Israel for He remembered His promise of mercy, the promise He made to our fathers, to Abraham and His children for ever."

It is October as I write this, the month of my birth, and the Scripture readings are from December, the month of my mother's birth. Her name was Justina. She passed away in 2002 and I think of her often. I was the first-born in our family, and as is the tradition in many Italian families, I was the one that was to be given back to God - or so said Aunts Rose and Julie and Carmen and Louise and Immaculata and Annunciata! So you can imagine the reaction when, at age 6, the young Albert informed everyone he wanted to be a priest. Oddly, we were in Rome on a summer school trip, on our way for a private audience with Pope Paul VI, when the letter from the seminary caught up with us informing me that I had been accepted. Mom cried and cried, and Dad said it was a sign that I was to be the first American Pope.

Well after seven years of study, I left the pursuit of the priesthood. Mom took it pretty hard. But then, five years later, the big bomb dropped...I came out as a gay man. Suffice it to say, it was not an easy coming out process. Eventually her mother's love overcame her reservations and our relationship grew into a deep abiding peace. But I wonder if she ever regretted that I did not become a priest. I wonder if she felt deprived of the sense of fulfillment that Hannah and Mary must have felt. But I think not. My bet is Hannah and Mary came to greet her when she entered heaven, and they all sat down over heavenly coffee and a holy cannoli and said to one another..."Our boys turned out OK didn't they?"

My hope is that every LGBTQ child - and every child in general - can experience (as Samuel and Jesus and I did) the deep, abiding peace that blossoms from knowing that they are unconditionally loved, regardless of vocation or orientation. And that all parents can trust - even in the difficult moments of raising a child (as Hannah and Mary and Justina did) that love will fulfill all our deepest desires in the end.

—Al R.

December 23, 2017; Saturday of the Third Week of Advent

Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Psalm 25:4-5ab, 8-9, 10, 14; Luke 1:57-66

Today is the real pre-Christmas! The month before is filled with hints, but today the readings bring us the full reality that Christ will be among us. This is the day we celebrate the birth of Jesus' messenger to the world. Given the Scriptural story, today should become Universal LGBTQ Coming Out Day, a day when the particular gifts of every person can be accepted and proclaimed – especially those in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, as well as queer and questioning individuals.

In the first reading from Malachi and the Responsorial Psalm, God sends a messenger to announce the Divine coming as a radical new force in the world; a new and unimaginable world of salvation is on its way. Parents don't anticipate having a homosexual child. They might be open to the idea, but no one paints a baby's room purple in anticipation of that option. In the same way, from birth to coming out, a child may anticipate feeling different, but what it means to fully know and accept one's sexuality is a matter of gradual growth of awareness. Feeling at home on Christopher or Castro Streets takes some time, and some listening to God's inner voice. In the same way the newness of what Christ will mean for humanity – being freed of Original Sin – took time and effort to understand (the span of the Hebrew Scriptures), and so being released from the self-doubt about one's sexual nature is not a snap realization, but the gift of a God who loves us in the long term, beyond covenantal limits.

The gospel reading from Luke is a real flip/flop of unusual events. An elderly barren woman with an old, mute husband is having a son just before a young kinswoman is to have a son whose legal father is covering for the supposed fathering by the Holy Spirit. How are those for awkward family dynamics! Who can anticipate the meaning of these events? In the same way, who can anticipate being or having an LGBTQ child whose reality won't become apparent for years in the future?

There are a few tip-offs that these events foretell great things. The child/messenger is to be called "John" even though it was expected he would be named after another family member, as was the custom. The soon-to-be-not-mute Zechariah confirms "John" will be his name. This messenger for God has a script to follow that is beyond tradition. So, too, someone who is same sex loving may be called beyond their birth family to create a "found" family and a new way of living. Christ's love calls us out of our narrow framework, so the naming of John brings the family to a moment of discord until his personal reality before God, and not the customs of his tribe, hold sway. Being homosexual might mean breaking with those who look and sound like us. Being ourselves calls us to a particular path that should not be denied. He must be John, not Zechariah – his own name and his own mission! As such, this day asks all of us to reverence the Holy Spirit's gift that is in all LGBTQ people – indeed the gift of the Spirit that is in the particular reality of each person created by God – no exceptions!

— Tom B.

December 24, 2017; Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29; Romans 16:25-27;
Luke 1:26-38

We've arrived at the last (Sun)day of Advent with our ears and hearts perked up to hear the good news: "Peace on earth to those on whom God's favor rests." The holy Virgin impregnated nine months ago gives birth to the Word, putting flesh on the Savior of the world. Who can believe that a virgin can mother a child? Who would believe that LGBTQ persons can be people of faith? Mary's question to Gabriel in today's gospel: "How can this happen?" as well as that second question are covered by the same reply: "The Holy Spirit will overshadow you... for nothing is impossible with God." As I meditate on this incredible scene, Mary's humble "Yes, let it be!" reminds me that she models for each of us the way to respond to God's invitations, even when we are misunderstood.

In his journal published posthumously under the title *Markings*, Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary General of the United Nations, reputedly martyred on a peace mission in 1961, shares with us that important moment in his own life: "I don't know Who – or What – put the question; I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer "Yes" to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender, had a goal."

For me, Hammarskjöld's words sound, in so many ways, as a commentary on Mary's faith and life – especially expressed in her Magnificat, the song she sang at the visit to her cousin, Elizabeth. Hammarskjöld's words: "To be in faith both humble and proud, that is TO LIVE, to know that in God I am nothing, but that God is in me." That was Mary's "Yes" to God – and to herself. We are invited and encouraged to offer our "Yes" to ourselves and to God, so that as with Mary the Word might take flesh in us and thus pitch Its tent in our midst, in the world, on whom God's favor rests.

These final words from Hammarskjöld aptly summarize Mary's life and prayer to God. May they also echo in our hearts and lives as LGBTQ persons blessed/loved by God:

"For all that has been, Thank You! For all that is to come, YES!"

— Alexei M.

December 25, 2017; Christmas, Mass at Midnight

Isaiah 9:1-6; Psalm 96:1-2, 2-3, 11-12, 13; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

It's happened to you before: someone comes up to you excitedly saying that they have the "BEST! NEWS! EVER!" How do you react? What if it really is the best news you can imagine? What if it's the answer to all your prayers and will change your life entirely? What do you do? Do you believe it? Do you run out and, acting on this new information, change everything about your life? Maybe your life has been full of work and worry, of quietly going about your business so as not to draw attention to yourself, maybe it has been full of fear and pain. Do you leave all you've known behind, or is it easier to just continue what you've been doing?

Change is hard and frightening – even when it's for the better. There have been times in my life when people have confronted me with good news that would change my life – maybe news that I didn't accept as being good at the time but would prove to be so very good. News that said I had the power to make a change. So often, I refused to make that change right away. I clung onto the life that I knew for fear of what the change might bring – that it might be too good to be true.

When I finally accepted the truth of the news – that I could come out of the closet, that I could get a different job, that I could leave an abusive relationship, that I could find healing and strength and live more fully – I did make changes. I found freedom – and I wished I'd done it sooner. Today – literally – we get the "BEST! NEWS! EVER!" – God has entered the world to save us from the darkness. Can we accept the truth of that news? Can we make the necessary changes to live this new truth and find freedom in our new lives? Or is our current darkness too comfortable to risk letting in the light?

— *Chris H.*

December 25, 2017; Christmas, Mass During the Day

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4, 5-6; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

Isaiah's celebration today pulls the very words from our mouths. How visceral a victory! How much exhilaration and exuberance! And what strikes me most is that Isaiah's celebration occurs before Christ was ever alive. The very anticipation of Christ's coming marked such an outpouring of hope! For the Hebrews, the coming of Christ was not only a spiritual coming, but a true victory against outside forces that seemed to give no care for them, or who actively wished them harm. God's promise was for a Messiah who would provide a home, a place of safety and victory that no power on earth could take away.

"The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." How many times do we as a community feel unmoored, exiled, and surrounded by the threatening darkness? But we have a true gift that those before us have not – Christ has already come to us. We live in a mystical world in which that which was promised has been delivered. We do have a spiritual home, and it's not contained by buildings or traditions or the confines of human imagining.

We still suffer. We still hurt. We still dream of a world that is free of turmoil and oppression, and sometimes happiness seems so far out of reach. And yet each week we are given to take within us the very Christ that our forbearers had longed for. And this same Christ lives within every single one of us.

It's a beautiful thing to know we aren't alone. We not only carry Christ within us, but we recognize that everyone we meet does as well. Even when the darkness creeps closer, we see the light in the darkness that illuminates the heart of those who surround us. Jesus ascended into heaven, but truly never left us. We can gather the spirit of Christ that is within each and every one of our neighbors and friends, until we are strong enough to build with our own hands and our own love (and with God) the world that we pray for.

Today, Love, your sentinels raise a cry, and together we shout for joy, for through us you restore your world, every single day.

— *Rory H.*

December 26, 2017; Feast of St. Stephen, Martyr

Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59; Psalm 31:3cd-4, 6 and 8ab, 16bc and 17; Matthew 10:17-22

Merry Christmas, again! Welcome to St. Stephen's Day. St. Stephen was the first Christian martyr, and the story of his death is in today's first reading. St. Stephen is my patron saint.

My dad became Catholic when he married my mom. When boys are born in the Rose family, they typically are given only a first name and a middle initial. For example, I am named after Allan S. Rose, but my name is Allen Stephen Rose. I was given the middle name of Stephen, so that I could be baptized in the Catholic Church.

Now, the truth is that I was (sort of) baptized twice. I was born three months early, and it wasn't clear that I was going to survive. A nurse at Tolfree Memorial Hospital, where I was born, baptized me on the first day of my life. A few months later I was baptized, (by a priest, just to make sure) with St. Stephen as my patron saint, in a formal ceremony at Sacred Heart Parish in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

Since then, I have shared in every sacrament other than Holy Orders. As a child, I received the sacraments of First Communion, Penance, and Confirmation. In 2015, my husband Francisco and I conferred the sacrament of matrimony on each other in a ceremony in front of our friends, family and the Dignity/Washington community. I have participated in Dignity/Washington's monthly anointing and healing ceremony. I have been blessed to live, in every way I can imagine, a life marked by the sacraments. One of the most important things that I have learned in this life is that I am a Catholic because of my baptism. It doesn't matter if I am gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or straight. No one can take being Catholic away from me.

The Church teaches that a sacrament is a visible sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace. According to Andrew Greeley, "the Catholic imagination" blossoms from, and is rooted in, this sacramental system where God is understood to be present in all of creation and "whereby material things and human beings are channels and sources of God's grace."

St. Stephen proclaimed this saving presence of Christ. In fact, he died proclaiming it. I am grateful that my imagination and experience have been sustained and enriched by a loving, merciful God and by the vision that the sacraments of our church provide. How have these sacraments influenced your imagination? How has your relationship with God and others been nourished by sharing in these conduits of grace? And like my patron Stephen, to what lengths have we been willing to go to make sure that all others have the same access to such channels of grace, and such a life-sustaining imagining of the world?

—Allen R.

December 27, 2017; Feast of St. John, Apostle, Evangelist

1 John 1:1-4; Psalm 97:1-2, 5-6, 11-12; John 20:1a, 2-8

St. John, the Apostle and Evangelist, has always been a particularly fascinating and inspiring figure for the queer community.

John refers to himself (arguably) in his gospel as “the beloved disciple,” which has led some to ask if there was a romantic relationship between Jesus and John? I am no biblical scholar, but on a gut level, I think not. If Jesus were actively engaging with questions of queer romance in his life, I really think he would have done us the courtesy of speaking about it more plainly.

But on that same plane of personal intuition, I like to think that there was some aspect of queerness about their friendship. Unrequited feeling, perhaps, or mutually felt and unspoken love. No matter the details, John and Jesus felt a love for each other that was singular, different from the rest. Not just loved; *beloved*.

So when John writes about God in deeply tangible terms at the beginning of his first letter, it is impossible not to imagine him experiencing the electric feeling of being in the presence of one you love. John leads us, as embodied people with senses, feelings and urges, from the beginning of life, to the redemption of humanity. The first reading starts:

“What was from the beginning, What we have heard, What we have seen with our eyes, What we looked upon And touched with our hands Concerns the Word of life - For the life was made visible.”

There are strong echoes here of the opening to the Gospel of John, which almost reads like the answers to the not-quite-asked questions at the start of John’s First Letter, making a bridge from the beginning of everything, to the fulfillment of God’s word in the coming of Christ.

The epistle asks: “What was from the beginning?”

The Gospel answers “In the beginning was the Word.”

“What have we heard?”

“The Word, which was God.”

“What have we seen with our eyes?”

“We have seen life, and that life was the Light of the Human Race, and the Light shines in darkness.”

“What have we looked upon and touched with our hands?”

“All things, and all things were made (through Christ).”

John professes a faith that embraces the visible, the tangible, the physical, and the human in a way I find deeply comforting. Regardless of whether the 21st century Church is ready to embrace the queer community fully, John speaks to us from two thousand years in the past to remind us that the divine acceptance we crave has never been withheld.

— *Anne K.*

December 28, 2017; The Holy Innocents, Martyrs

1 John 1:5-2:2; Psalm 124:2-3, 4-5, 7cd-8; Matthew 2:13-18

Matthew's gospel reading today is the story of how after the Magi returned home by a different route – not revisiting Herod – the Angel of the Lord warns Joseph, by dream, to take Mary and the newborn Jesus, and to flee to Egypt. Then the enraged Herod has all the infant boys of Israel killed. This story is largely told to present Jesus as a new Moses – the baby Jesus's escape of Herod parallels Moses escaping pharaoh in the reeds of the Nile River – and then sending the holy family to, and, eventually, up from Egypt fulfills a prophecy of Hosea that Israel's and our deliverance will be called from out of Egypt.

This story reminded me of a line from an old Supertramp song: “take the long way home.” Everyone in this narrative seems to be taking a long way home – the Magi take a different and presumably a longer route home to avoid Herod; Mary and Joseph definitely take a long way home – again pointing back to Moses, of the original 40-year way home. And if one thinks of “home” as more a metaphor for a goal or target, Herod's extreme measures would seem a long way to achieve his intentions. And one could argue that the angel of the Lord might have taken a more direct path to rescue Jesus – skipping two dreams and all the resultant travel by directly visiting Herod and giving him the sort of message “this isn't the child you're looking for, move on” – but that would bypass the purpose, and the imagery, of the story.

But what can this story mean for us? Historically many of us in the LGBTQ community have taken a long way home – and not always by choice. Many of us like the Magi, have had to deal with the “authorities” by avoidance and misdirection. Like Mary and Joseph, a lot of LGBTQ people take circuitous routes, often traveling distances to find spaces safe enough to create new homes, new communities, new families. This story doesn't tell us what awaited Mary and Joseph in Egypt – were there other Israelite expatriates to meet them and perhaps ease their settling in? The only thing implied in this story is that their faith directed and protected them along their route. For many of us, we've depended on the same kind of faith, that we would be guided in the right direction, with the hope that when we arrived, a home would be there waiting for us.

— Tom Y.

December 29, 2017; Fifth Day within the Octave of Christmas

1 John 2:3-11; Psalm 96:1-2a, 2b-3, 5b-6; Luke 2:22-35

“And you yourself a sword will pierce.”

Simeon spoke this prophecy to Mary at the presentation of Jesus in the Temple. The word “sword” placed on Simeon’s lips is a Greek term used only here and one other time in the book of Revelation, nowhere else in the New Testament. It speaks of the large barbaric sword used by the Thracians, as distinguished from the shorter weapon of Roman soldiers. This type of sword could have metaphorically split Mary’s heart (and her whole body) in two, not so much a piercing as a slicing!

Mary’s heart and soul were singly focused on loving and supporting her son, yet, as Simeon foretold, she must have found her heart divided in two as Jesus’ life unfolded before her. There must have been some part of her that wanted him to take up the family business of carpentry and stick close to the home in Nazareth - to be safe and typical. Simultaneously, another part of Mary’s desire for her son was for him to fulfill his God-given mission - to speak up for the poor, the vulnerable; to extend his hand in care to tax collectors and sex workers; to live in a way that showed every person is created and loved by a life-giving God - this would be neither safe nor typical. This split heart must have been so tough for her, wanting to keep her son safe and close while also knowing the challenge of supporting him in his call to make the world a better place.

If you are like me, you may have experienced a similar split in your own heart concerning your life. Quite honestly, there is a portion of my heart that wants to hide who I am; that buys into the societal view that being part of the LGBTQ community is somehow wrong or to be disdained; that believes that a closet is a safer and better place than the risks associated with coming out of it. Simultaneously, my heart longs to boldly own who I am; to speak out for equal rights in order to create a more just world; and to acknowledge the sacred mission to obey the love placed uniquely in one’s own heart.

This split heart - or should we call it simply a broken heart? - is born of trying to reconcile our inner call with the external expectations that can overwhelm us. It carries within it all the sadness that comes from never quite measuring up to either urge. It is the sadness of always feeling in between - having left a place to which I cannot return, but not being able to live fully in the place to which I am called. It is worth noting though that Simeon’s prayer speaks of the peace he feels and the revelation of God’s light in the world. Maybe that’s the real message here - it is only when we allow our own hearts to be broken open by living in the midst of a calling we can neither fulfill nor reject that God’s love flows most abundantly through us. It is in the “already-but not yet” of Jesus’ coming, of our own calling, and embedded in the structure of Advent (and life) itself when our sliced-open hearts can finally have enough room to let God’s light penetrate the darkness that surrounds us but will not conquer us.

— R. S.

December 30, 2017; Sixth Day within the Octave of Christmas

1 John 2:12-17; Psalm 96:7-8a, 8b-9, -10; Luke 2:36-40

This is not good timing. Here we are in the midst of the most party-full week of the year – a week filled with material gifts, sweets, drinks, and the company of friends all dressed in new Christmas clothes. Still bloated from Christmas dinners, we are ramping up for New Year’s Eve feasts and large spreads for New Year’s Day open houses. Then, in one of the great party-poopier moments of all time, John’s First Letter says, “Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of [God] is not in him [or her!].” Here we are, the wrappings and boxes are not even thrown away yet, and we are being told that loving the things of this world means not loving God. Can these two “loves” really be in such direct opposition?

Maybe. But I think this Scripture calls us not so much to reject all of the physical blessings around us, but rather to see them for what they are – manifestations of the One Love from which all things come. In other words, I think what we could see as a dichotomy – the Spirit of God vs. the physical world – is better seen as a methodology – the Spirit of God through the physical world. Instead of getting lost in our parties and gifts, can we allow whatever we gave and got to lead us to a deeper gratitude for all of the peoples, joys and challenges that make up our lives? Can whatever gifts we have given and received remind us that, ultimately, all of our lives are a gift from the Source of All?

I think John’s First Letter is calling us not so much to reject all of the ways God is present to us in the good world that Love created, but rather, to remember that all of these “things” are calling us to a deeper gratitude and generosity. If we focus on the things of life, then we never have enough. There is always a better job, a bigger house, a better friend, a nicer car. But if we focus on the love that we have received and given, then we are much more likely to be satisfied. In the end, it is not what we have that fills us, but paradoxically, what we have given away.

— *Anonymous*

December 31, 2017; Feast of The Holy Family

Genesis 15:1-6, 21:1-3; Psalm 105:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9; Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:22-40

Family. That single word can carry with it many memories, hopes, and anxieties. Family can be those who brought us into this world, passing on a genetic code. Family can be those who raised and nurtured us to have values and a self. Family can be those we surround ourselves within our daily lives, our adopted family. Family can be who we marry and the children we raise. Family can be those with whom we share our spirituality and worship. Family can be all humanity. Family is a constant presence in our lives, showing us where we have been and hopefully who will be by our side regardless of where we go.

For some in the LGBTQ community, family can be a hard word to hear. Many of us have been hurt by the family that raised us, others of us have been blocked from starting the family we yearn for, or have had to do so in fear. This is why for much of the LGBTQ community our most important family is our friends and community. This adoptive family is something we choose. This is our Chosen Family. Who is your chosen family?

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul address the people as “God’s chosen ones.” God has chosen us, just as we have chosen our family. Our chosen LGBTQ family is “holy and beloved.” Paul goes on to call us to put on “heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” But where do these attributes come from? I would say these are the values a family instills. We are called to take up these gifts, but not without the help of our family.

This theme of a family helping to nourish our gifts continues in the gospel. Luke writes, “They took him to Jerusalem to present him to God... When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of God, they returned to Galilee... The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom.” Luke uses the pronouns “*they*” and “*their*.” Who is this *they*? On the surface, we are to infer this is Mary and Joseph, but *they* could also include more than a mother and father. Perhaps *they* includes brothers, aunts, neighbors, friends, community... Perhaps *they* includes us? With the support of our family, we are called to put on our gifts and present the Jesus within us to God in thanksgiving and joy. And to have this same spirit of Jesus within us grow strong and wise that it too might be given fully for the healing of our world.

— *Christopher F.*

January 1, 2018; Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God

Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21

Today's gospel notes that among all the shepherds' joy and excitement and the visitors to baby Jesus, "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." I want to sit with that concept of Mary reflecting.

Mary, having traveled with Joseph in an exhaustive journey to find a safe place to have her baby, had given birth in a stable. Despite this, Mary seemed to graciously accept visitors and their praise, soaking it all in, reflecting on it all.

Mary may have reflected on it then, after giving birth. But she didn't stop with reflection; instead that reflection led her to transformation. She must have been coming to realize the gravity and the awesome responsibility of her role as mother of God incarnate. This reflection and deeper realization I believe also transformed her. She became a fierce advocate and disciple of Jesus throughout her life, spreading his message of love.

As queer Catholics, we can relate to this journey of Mary's. It is only through reflecting on who we are, that we have come to know ourselves as bisexual, or lesbian, or transgender, or gay, or something else that doesn't fit the heteronormative society we live in.

I believe this deeper understanding calls us to tell our stories, sharing who we are with others. At the DignityUSA Young Adult Caucus retreat in the summer of 2016, we practiced this storytelling (after some reflection, of course). Several young queer Catholics told their stories – of struggle, desperation, fear, and violence, but also of joy, community, acceptance, and love – and all who were in that room listening to those stories were transformed.

The LGBTQ community is known for sharing our coming out stories, but our stories don't stop there. We are challenged to continue reflecting, coming to a deeper understanding of who we are, and sharing of ourselves with others. And just as Mary was, with this sharing, we will be transformed. And we will continue to transform each other and our communities for the better.

— *Martín W.*

January 2, 2018; Christmas Weekday

1 John 2:22-28; Psalm 98:1, 2-3ab, 3cd-4; John 1:19-28

In the opening of John's Gospel, the Jews ask John the Baptist, "Who are you?" The Baptist clearly knows his identity. Not missing a beat, John proclaims that he is the precursor of Christ and, in humility, acknowledges that he is unworthy even to untie the Messiah's sandal strap.

"Who are you?" is a question that each of us can ask ourselves. As I thought about "Who are you?" La Cage aux Folles came to mind. Probably most LGBTQ people have seen the musical or the movie about this gay couple: Georges who manages a nightclub featuring drag entertainment and Albin, his partner, who is the star attraction.

Every word of Albin's song, "I Am What I Am," is food for meditation. Consider this verse: "It's my world that I want to take a little pride in, My world, and it's not a place I have to hide in. ...Life's not worth a damn, 'Til you can say, 'Hey world, I am what I am.'"

I want to learn not only to say, "Hey world, I am what I am," but also to accept myself and say, "Hey, you know, I am what I am" and that's OK. But it's hard. I don't seem to be any more charitable or virtuous than I was before. I have the same faults and frailties and they seem to be getting worse! I don't feel any smarter or more capable than I was 10 or even 20 years ago. In fact, as I grow older, I seem to be going downhill in practically every area! Sometimes it's hard to accept being who I am and loving who I am. After all, I'm not Elijah or John the Baptist.

When I feel down or "not good enough" in others' eyes or in my own eyes, I need you, God, to help me love ME as I am today. When I was young, I spent a lot of time telling you, God, how much I love you. Now I need to hear your voice crying out in my wilderness every day, telling me how much YOU love ME and how precious I am to You. Thank you, dearest God, for loving me for Who I Am.

—*Jeannine G.*

January 3, 2018; Christmas Weekday

1 John 2:29-3:6; Psalm 98:1, 3cd-4, 5-6; John 1:29-34

The Sacraments have always had a special place in our faith tradition. We see them as special channels of God's loving presence. In former days, some theologians even argued that Christmas was, itself, a sacrament.

We celebrate the Christmas season for roughly two weeks, but we are not allowed to bask for too long in the light of the Incarnation. During this period, we not only exult in the nativity of Jesus, son of Mary and Son of God, we also remember St. Stephen, the first martyr, the Holy Innocents, and the Holy Family. As January begins, we celebrate the Feast of Mary the Mother of God, and then turn our attention to the feast of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, an American woman. Finally, St. John Neumann, a Bohemian immigrant to America, comes along before the end of the Christmas season in the Feasts of the Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord. Indeed, the church never allows us to avoid the world's needs for very long.

In today's gospel we get that same evenhanded reading of life here on Earth, both awash in the light of the Incarnation and absorbed in the many needs of our demanding lives. We get a glimpse of Jesus as John the Baptist sees him – as the "Lamb of God." The designation is not lost on John's hearers. Lambs are for sharing and for sacrifice; both are implied in the naming of Jesus by John.

John knows two things as he speaks in today's gospel. First, he knows that he is not the Messiah. He baptizes with water, to cleanse and help us take a step back toward God. We take John's example when we turn away from our brokenness and sin. Second, John recognizes that Jesus – this "lamb of God" – is the Messiah. Jesus baptizes not with water but with the Holy Spirit, the powerful love that envelopes us exactly as we are.

How we long to know God's presence and will with such clarity! This brings us back to the sacraments. They show us with special clarity the holiness of water, oil, bread, forgiveness, relationships, and community. This sense of sacramentality calls us to see all of creation as gift, as grace, as God's love revealed. As members of the LGBTQ community, we have often struggled to see God's love in these ordinary acts of our daily lives, because we have grown up thinking them disordered or wrong. But it is precisely the Catholic sacramental imagination that shows us that God is in all of our loves and lives. The clarity of John the Baptist is the clarity of the sacraments, as we see with John's eyes of faith: "Behold the Lamb of God!" – the presence of God right in front of me. In a child's hug... in a partner's health... through a co-worker's concern... in my privilege of perception and ability to speak for the voiceless.

Perhaps a useful New Year's resolution for me is to mindfully foster an awareness of God's presence in my everyday encounters and activities. "Behold, the Lamb of God." God's love revealed in actions and activities big and small, but revealed, always and everywhere, nonetheless.

—Jim L.

January 4, 2018; Christmas Weekday

I John 3:7-10; Psalm 98:1, 7-8, 9; John 1:35-42

Jesus turned and saw (two of John's disciples) following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?"

They said, "Rabbi, ... where are you staying?"

He said to them, "Come, and you will see."

So they went and saw where he was staying and they stayed with him that day.

Later, Andrew, one of those who stayed with Jesus was the first to declare him as the Messiah. He was converted, it seems, not by Jesus' spell-binding speeches, but rather, by spending time with him. In fact, this seems to have been Jesus' most common evangelization strategy – spend time with people. He ate dinner with folks, went to their weddings, told stories, shared their struggles, and then let the miracles of healing happen in the midst of the honest and accepting communion that occurred.

This rather inefficient model of conversion – it's hard to get economies of scale for intimate conversations – stands in stark contrast to our methods of communicating these days, which seem filled with the call to protest but absent the call to deep listening and personal growth. Jesus' most challenging remarks – which so often convey the message that God's love is bigger than we think – stand on a foundation of time spent together, as opposed to the hyperbolic outrage that can pass for "telling it like it is."

When I have spent time really getting to know someone – a family member who I might have "known" all my life, a struggling student, a transgender woman – I always seem to come away with the realization that their struggle is more noble than I had realized and that God's love is bigger than I thought. That's what is so very frustrating about the Church's proclamations about the LGBTQ community. People have declared how I should live without first getting to know me. In our country, we seem to get to know only people who think like us or with whom we already agree. Jesus, it seems, was just the opposite. He was willing to listen to, and share with, everyone from rabbis, to sex workers, to Samaritans, to the wealthy care-takers of the temple. That's where Jesus' example is most challenging to me these days – personal and social conversion not by being right, but by being together. Some days, I'm honestly not sure if I'm up to so much togetherness, but even on those days I am sure that there is no other way to love our neighbors as ourselves.

—Jeff V.

January 5, 2018; Christmas Weekday

1 John 3:11-21; Psalm 100:1b-2, 3, 4, 5; John 1:43-51

Today's readings are all about our call to follow Jesus and love one another. In 1 John, we hear that with "Love one another" it's impossible to say that you hate your brother and/or sister and remain in fellowship with God.

The Good News? It's actually possible to love one another! Loving one another is acknowledging each other's brokenness and helping each other find righteousness.

The Gospel today begins in Galilee with Jesus inviting Philip to "Follow me." Philip in turn finds Nathanael and tells him they have found the one Moses had written about in the law and also the prophets, "Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth."

The reference to Nazareth in the hill country gives Nathanael pause and he says, "Nazareth, that godforsaken place. Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Our prejudices cloud over our response to people. How often have people tried to put other people into boxes by looking down at their gender, their gender identity, origin, race, or family. How many stereotypes come up when someone references the LGBTQ community, referring to the community, their friends, and allies the same way Nathanael references Jesus?

Philip does not argue with Nathanael, but instead simply invites him to, "Come and see." Clever arguments and personal opinions don't win people to the Gospel, but an encounter with the person of Jesus will open their eyes and they will see.

The story continues as Nathanael accepts the invitation to see Jesus. Jesus then takes the initiative and identifies Nathanael: "Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathaniel is perplexed about Jesus' knowledge of him: "Where did you get to know me?" To which Jesus responds, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then the scales fall off of Nathanael eyes and he bursts out saying: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the Sovereign of Israel!"

Nathanael is surprised that Jesus read the thoughts of his innermost heart. Jesus leads Nathaniel further. We, too, must be open to that leading, to follow Jesus out of our comfort zone.

God expects us to love others in the same way God loves us and in the way God loves them. Perhaps we can pray specifically for two things this week: (a) For the needs on your heart; and (b) for eyes to see and ears to hear how God would have you humbly and practically love another person this week.

—Ann P.

January 6, 2018; Christmas Weekday

1 John 5:5-13; Psalm 147:12-13, 14-15, 19-20; Mark 1:7-11

Christmas time in the liturgical year is most unique insofar as it begins with the Nativity of Christ and fast-forwards to the Baptism of Jesus and the inauguration of his public ministry. What went on during the “hidden life” of Christ remains mysterious, but without doubt, he was mentored, loved, and guided by many gifted men and women. Is it any wonder that when rising from the waters of baptism, the heavens opened and a voice came down from above, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”?

In the first reading, St. John’s letter testifies that “God gave us eternal life, and, this life is in his Son.” The Spirit, water, and the blood of Christ encapsulate John’s testimony.

Today may be a wonderful opportunity to reflect upon our own baptismal vows and commitment to these promises of eternal life, and our lives in Christ.

Being a Christian during these complex and demanding times, implores us to evaluate our participation in the social imperatives of the Gospel – our ministry to the poor, the disenfranchised, and the oppressed. These are indeed the indelible characteristics of being baptized in Christ’s Spirit.

Questions we might ask to evaluate our baptismal promises: Am I racing fast forward with worries about the future? Or in slow motion, repeating past failures and regrets? Or am I living in the present moment with grace, fearlessness, and commitment to Christ? Hopefully, we are living in the here and now. If so, listen carefully for the words: “You are my beloved daughters and sons, with whom I am well pleased.”

—*Jerry F.*

January 7, 2018; Feast of the Epiphany

*Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6;
Matthew 2:1-12*

Here is my secret. It is very simple:

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;

what is essential is invisible to the eye.

--The Little Prince, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

The Feast of the Epiphany is all about seeing. Despite the humble surroundings, the Magi can see God's glory in Jesus. They can see Jesus' role as Savior of the world, even as they saw the star as their guide. So, too, in the reading from Isaiah, the people of Israel are called to see beyond the "darkness [that] covers the earth, and [the] thick clouds [that] cover the people;" and instead, "Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you ... be radiant at what you see ... the wealth of nations shall be brought before you."

In both cases, the Scriptures invite us to see beyond the visible so that we can recognize the essential, to see beyond the darkness of our present and into the light that streams both toward us and from within us. So, too, I hope these reflections offer light and hope to anyone who can feel overcome by the daily struggles that can dim our vision – struggles that are not confined to the LGBTQ community, nor to any other particular community. No one has cornered the market on suffering, and we all struggle to make the most of our own lives.

Most of all, then, I hope these reflections help us see that what is essential in the Incarnation of Jesus: that God's love and God's Spirit have been made touchable in our world, and in each of us. No matter how dark the times, or how difficult the days, every person has the miraculous capacity to receive and to share the very same light and love that created the universe, and that gave us Jesus. This life-giving miracle is available to everyone in every moment. We tell our stories through the particular lens of our LGBTQ experience, not because our experience is more valuable or more important than anyone else's, but because we hope that through our particular stories we might all see what is essential in every story – the dignity and the glory of God made manifest not in some people, but in each person; not in some love, but in every love.

— *Anonymous*

