
THE EPISTLE OF ST. THOMAS

St. Thomas Episcopal Church
The Rev. Jeff Douglas

December 2016

Diocese of East Carolina
The Rt. Rev. Robert Skirving

The Thief of Advent

But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. (Matthew 24:43-44)



The reign of God will come like a thief in the night, leaving doors ajar, cracking windows open, stealthily seeping into our world without any warning. It will be unnerving because it will disturb our well-worn patterns of life. It will urge us out of our warm beds when we would prefer to slumber away, and let the world pass by. We prefer to slumber in our beds under our warm comforters to being led by the Spirit as the Israelites were by Moses through cold desert nights toward a promised freedom but with so many unknowns.



But Advent is the time for taking off the kerchief and cap, which we don for, in the words from *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, a long winter's nap and open our eyes. Your senses have to be alive and awake, listening for the odd sound, looking for something out of place or moving when all is still. And just perhaps with one eye you might catch a glimpse of the thief of Advent. And having caught that glimpse, arise and investigate to see what the thief is up to.



You see, the thief of Advent is not here to steal but to reveal God's coming kingdom, not with bright lights and musical fanfares but with small glimpses of compassion, fleeting moments of self-sacrifice and little acts of love. The thief shows us doors that he finds ajar, just cracked open and invites, even dares us to walk through them. These doors are like the child that leaps in Elizabeth's womb, the promise that Simeon believes will be fulfilled before he dies, and Joseph's choice to take a pregnant Mary as a wife. They are odd, out of the ordinary circumstances that lead us toward a new reality.

The Advent thief comes like the Advent calendar, opening little doors for us to peer into the tiny gifts behind them. But the Advent thief's doors and gifts are subtler and infinitely more difficult to find than the doors on your Advent calendar. The Advent thief may open the door at a nursing home, or at a Christmas tree nursery. The thief may open the door in the middle of the mall at the height of your gift shopping frenzy. The gifts may come as carol being sung, a bell being rung, or just a simple accepting smile for a passerby or even the distress of a baby's cry.

You never really know where or when the Advent thief may strike. So be aware, keep awake, with your eyes

wide open and your senses tingling with anticipation. Then and only then will you see the doors just slightly ajar, the windows cracked open. Then and only then will you be ready for the gifts and they will become real.

May the thief of Advent lead you around these darkened days and even darker nights to the little doors of your heart and leave them ajar so that the treasures that lie within may be offered to a world as blessings where we stand on shaky ground, unsure and unsteady, waiting for compassion, generosity and peace to steady our feet. And finally, may the thief of Advent lead you one dark and starry night to hear the cries of mother in distress, to an illegitimate baby being born in a barn, that most unlikely of children whose cries will change us and our world forever.



Happy Advent!

Jeff+



From the Senior Warden...

More Than Enough

There are, of course, many excellent Christmas movies to enjoy this season, and one of my favorites is the sometimes overlooked *The Bishop's Wife* from 1947 (perhaps overshadowed by *It's A Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street*, which came out one year earlier and the same year, respectively). In this classic, the angel Dudley (Cary Grant) is sent to help as a guide and aide to Henry Brougham (David Niven), an Episcopal bishop consumed with building a new cathedral, and his wife Julia (Loretta Young). Absorbed with plans and regulations and funding initiatives to bankroll the new structure, Henry has lost focus on both his family and his priestly duties, and Dudley's entrance influences the couple as they find their way and re-find their footing.

The climax of the film includes Henry's sermon at the midnight Christmas Eve service, a homily truly given to him through divine means (*i.e.*, from Dudley). From the pulpit, Henry preaches, "Once upon a midnight clear, there was a child's cry. A blazing star hung over a stable and wise men came with birthday gifts. We haven't forgotten that night down the centuries," particularly as seen and symbolized through the giving of gifts. "All the stockings are filled...all, that is, except one—the stocking for the child born in the manger...Let us ask ourselves what he would wish for most...and then let each put in his share. Loving kindness, warm hearts, and the stretched-out hand of tolerance. All the shining gifts that make peace on earth." At its conclusion, the sermon is given through a voiceover, so that Niven's inimitable voice is heard while the camera shows the congregation and then the angel Dudley, with these images scored by the sounds of the cathedral organ and its choir.

At this point in the year, with longer nights and seemingly shorter patience, the message reads very much as highly sentimental, but it certainly is a satisfying coda for the film and a powerful concept for us all. And the kaleidoscopic nature of my mind, which blurs ideas and memories and

shifts with a twist of the tube from one shape to a connected but different one, goes from that cinematic sermon to a song sung on *A Christmas Together*, my favorite Christmas album from childhood, featuring songs by John Denver and the Muppets. In “Christmas Wish,” Kermit sings “I have held the precious gift that love brings, even though I never saw a Christmas star. I know there is a light; I have felt it burn inside, and I have seen it shining from afar.” The song’s final exhortation is to remind all “and if you believe in love that will be more than enough for peace to last throughout the coming year.” In all honesty, my personal brand of cynicism clashes with the message and its seeming simplicity, but surely there is some potential within every one of us to find that love and to bring that peace. I was proud to be a member of St. Thomas’ this past month when we hosted an Evening Prayer Service of Reconciliation following the nasty election season. Our parish offered to the community a chance to put harsh feelings away and to offer loving kindness, warm hearts, and the stretched-out hand of tolerance. Peace on Earth is a lofty goal, and perhaps Peace on the Meherrin is still a stretch, but we are not letting opportunities to reach out our hands to the family of man pass us by.

Though Advent starts our church calendar, its placement at the end of the traditional year merges the beauty of its anticipatory language with nostalgic reflection, and the combination of that reflection with Christmas does tend to produce clear moments for introspection as well as joy. One of our parish’s great gifts to the community is the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols held each year on Advent 4. (I would offer a disclaimer that I do proudly sing in this service as a chorister, but my family and I were attending—and both eagerly anticipating and enjoying—this service even before we joined St. Thomas’.) Lessons and Carols is a contemplative service that is, at once, powerful and serene, and thoughtful and thought-provoking. This joyful evening (this year on Sunday, 18 December, at 5 PM) combines the talents of the choir and the entire parish family in a gift to the greater community. We are able to soar on wings of song (whether like birds or like angels) with each of the carols sung, and those musical moments are shining gifts that remind us of the power of art spreading the mystery of the Word. All who come to the service can leave feeling peace that lasts throughout the coming year.

“If I cannot fly, let me sing.”
“Green Finch & Linnet Bird”—Stephen Sondheim



St. Thomas' Episcopal Church
Minutes, Vestry Meeting
15 November 2016

The Vestry, Rector, and Treasurer of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church met on Tuesday, 15 November, 2016 at 6 PM in the Rector's office.

Present: Hugh Davis (Senior Warden), Mike Steczak (Junior Warden), Claudia Griffin, Patsy Jones, Rob Outland, David Simons, Ernie Carter (Treasurer), and Jeff Douglas (Rector).

Prior Minutes. After an opening prayer by the Rector, the minutes of the 18 October meeting were reviewed, approved, and accepted.

Treasurer's Report. The Treasurer provided statements from the previous month. Once again, the church faces a month in which expenditures outpace income. The Vestry discussed the growing concern that pledges and payments are down considerably for the church. While there will be requests for pledges for 2017, parishioners should also be aware of the financial shortfall for 2016.

The Lobster Feast profits (still to be determined based on one remaining outstanding bill) will be shared, with one-third each going to the Rector's Discretionary Fund, the Ahoskie Food Pantry, and Episcopal Relief & Development (earmarked to be used in relief for recent flooding in our region).

Chuck Revelle has responded to our requests to move ahead in the sale of Braxton Britt's land. There is a timetable in place for the sale. Ernie will continue to serve as the church's designee interacting with Chuck Revelle.

The Diocesan Pledge is due; our prior level for the pledge is slightly higher than the diocesan request. The Vestry voted to continue giving at the prior level.

Service. Soup Kitchen will most likely be cancelled for the month of November because of scheduling issues and the unavailability of several of the church members who most often contribute. Jeff will make sure the cancellation is reported to the parish.

While several parts of the diocese were hit very hard after Hurricane Matthew, areas in the Albemarle Deanery were generally luckier; however, that does not lessen the effect on Windsor, including St. Thomas (which had damage to its parish hall). The Diocese is working on creating Disaster Response Teams, with each church naming at least one member.

Worship. With Christmas day falling on a Sunday, St. Thomas' will hold only one service that day (at 10:30).

Junior Warden's Report. A yearly review will be held for Mary Breeden on her ongoing housekeeping duties for the church. Jeff is collecting feedback before this meeting.

The fascia board on the porch covering the office entrance has been completed and painted. The porch ceiling needs to be powerwashed and painted.

Per the Exterminator's request, the additional crawl space door has been installed on the east side of the church. An electrician is installing two fans under the church proper; the fans will have a dehumidistat that will control the units based on levels of humidity. The electrician will also install a light in the second stall in the men's bathroom.

The sign has been updated with new tracks and new (all-black) letters. Several compliments were reported to the Junior Warden about these improvements.

Other. Stewardship speakers are being recruited to speak in upcoming services.

Hugh and Patsy are working on recruiting new members for the Vestry.

The annual Parish meeting will be after church on Sunday, 8 January 2017.

The church received a letter from DA Valerie Asbell reporting a guilty plea from an arrested party for the theft from the church earlier in the year. Ernie is to follow up with the District Attorney's office about proper restitution.

Upcoming Dates.

17 November: ECW Luncheon & Bazaar

9-10 December: Murfreesboro Candlelight Christmas

18 December (Advent 4): Festival of Nine Lessons & Carols, 5 PM

20 December: Vestry Meeting & Dinner, Jeff & Beth Douglas' House, 6 PM

24 December: Christmas Eve Eucharist Service, 5 PM, St. Thomas'

24 December: Christmas Eve Eucharist Service, 7 PM, St. Mary's (Gatesville)

25 December: Christmas Day Service, 10:30 AM

8 January: Annual Parish Meeting

Respectfully submitted,

Hugh H. Davis

Senior Warden/Temporary Clerk



A Token

I'm a sucker for sacrifice, not by me, of course but by others. I can become very emotional when confronted by it. Oh, my eyes water during the final scene of *It's a Wonderful Life*, but those are happy tears. I also tear up when I watch sacrifice in films, as when Errol Flynn and his entire Confederate company willingly go to their deaths at the end of the movie *Rocky Mountain* so that a group of Union soldiers and loyalists can live or when an old man and a young man give their lives to save others in *Escape from Fort Bravo*, particularly when the old man pats the young man's hand before clasping it as they die together, and I am especially moved as the dead captain's men look down silently or speak last words softly, "I'm sorry, Sir," stopping briefly before passing the body of their beloved commander in *The Story of G.I. Joe*. Those are films, fictions, that touch something in me; however, when I hear and see news reports of deaths of soldiers. Marines, or sailors in, or of returning bodies from, Iraq or Afghanistan, my eyes also fill and I become quiet. They need not be American; they can be British or Canadian or another nationality. They died in place of and for someone else—maybe me—who, in different time or place, might have been in that situation. These sacrifices are stark and mortal reminders not only of the Great Sacrifice of 2000 years ago but they place into perspective the smallness of the sacrifices we are asked to make to continue reminding people of the significance of the now twice-millennia denial of self that freed us to do in small what He, and others since, have done in great. Part of our minor sacrifice, and oblation, to God and to humanity is a pledge, whatever size, to our small church, which has proven that a small—even a tiny—place and a few people can do much. Please help it and all of us continue to offer that proof to the larger world.

Thank you for your time and indulgence.

John H. Davis

One Parishioner of St. Thomas' Church



DECEMBER BIRTHDAYS

- 4 Martie Tayloe
- 5 John Davis
- 8 Jack Tayloe
- 22 Bill Blanchard
- 22 Michael Douglas

*"O God, our times are in your hand: Look with favor; we pray, on your servants, **Martie, John, Jack, Bill, Michael**, as they begin another year. Grant that they may grow in wisdom and grace, and strengthen their trust in your goodness all the days of their lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."*

DECEMBER ANNIVERSARIES

- 7 Fred and Sue Liverman
- 11 Jack and Lindsay Vaughan
- 27 Mike and Cheryl Steczak



*"O God, you have so consecrated the covenant of marriage that in it is represented the spiritual unity between Christ and his Church: Send therefore your blessing upon, **Fred and Sue, Jack and Lindsay, Mike and Cheryl**, that they may so love, honor, and cherish each other in faithfulness and patience, in wisdom and true godliness, that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**"*





St. Thomas Episcopal Church – Schedules for December 2016

Acolytes

- 4 Mary Outland and Christiana Vaughan
11 Charles Sawyer
18 Jerrie Taylor and Cecelia Jones
25 Bill Blanchard and Robby Outland

Altar Flowers

- 6 Hon. and Mrs. Tom Newbern
13 Mr. and Mrs. Julie Shields
20 Poinsettias
27 Poinsettias

Altar Guild

Mary C. Pierce and Becky Hoggard

Food Pantry (Note-Wednesdays)

- 7 Dicky Hoggard
14 Jim Shotwell
21 Peggy Vann
28 Bubba Peele

Lay Readers

- | | | | |
|----|----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 4 | 10:30 am | Holy Eucharist | Martie Tayloe |
| 7 | 6:00 pm | Evening Prayer | Martie Tayloe |
| 11 | 8:00 am | Morning Prayer | Open |
| | 10:30 am | Holy Eucharist | Colin Jones |
| 14 | 6:00 pm | Evening Prayer | Colin Jones |
| 18 | 10:30 am | Holy Eucharist | Claudia Griffin |
| 21 | 6:00 pm | NO EVENING PRAYER | |
| 24 | 5:00 pm | Holy Eucharist | Buck Suiter |
| 25 | 10:30 am | Holy Eucharist | John Davis |
| 28 | 6:00 pm | NO EVENING | NO EVENING PRAYER |

Ushers

Fred Liverman and Bubba Peele

Yard Work

- 4 Dicky Hoggard and Johnny Griffin
11 Jim Shotwell and Fred Liverman
18 Jim Shotwell and Fred Liverman
25 Ernie Carter and Benjie Brown



St. Thomas Episcopal Church
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