

Happy New Year! And Happy Sabbath! And Happy 8th Day of Christmas!

I gotta tell y'all a story. Many years ago, Becca came to my Grandma Sue's house for Christmas. This was her first time in the chaos tornado that is a Cato holiday. I wish y'all could've seen her face. As soon as we walked in, she immediately looked like she'd snuck up on an alley-full of unsuspecting raccoons, and my family looked like they'd been snuck up on. The whole house was an explosion of decorations, one wall covered in more stockings than gypsum board, one serving of food fewer than there were mouths to eat it, full grown cousins wrestling under the tree, and grandma in the corner in her curl-up-and-dye chair with feet up and a bevy of unsuspecting little ones lined up to rub those feet. Do you know what a curl-up-and-dye chair is, by the way? Is that a Southern thing? A curl-up-and-dye chair is what you sit in while you wait for your curlers to set. It's spelled d-y-e not d-i-e.

Anyway, the Cowboys were losing to someone on one muted TV and an old western blared on another, and the only place to find any quiet anywhere was the bathroom, but even that wasn't a guarantee since the lock broke three Thanksgivings prior. The afternoon carried on, and everyone ate just shy of enough and Grandma couldn't understand why she'd run out of food (which she did every year), and the aunts and uncles all looked miserable and the cousins were starting to get antsy and one distant relative with something removed - if I'd understood the introduction right - threatened to leave if we didn't get a move on. There were enough seats in Grandma's sitting room to entertain eight comfortably, and we numbered somewhere north of thirty. A big cousin, I mean big as in age not size, though he does stand about six-foot-two, a big cousin arrived, bear-hugged everyone that bothered to stand up and awkward leaning but not falling over hugged everyone that stayed seated, and then he plopped down right between two folks where there wasn't any room to plop, and the legs of the couch gave way. No one was hurt, and truth be told, the awkwardness kinda fit everything else that was going on, so no one said anything while we all silently prayed that Grandma Sue's head wouldn't explode. Then a little cousin, I mean little as in age not size, though he does stand about 3-foot-2, started crying, which meant it was time, finally: the babe's wails the traditional signal that the time to open presents had arrived. The chaos tornado really went to whipping its way around as gifts got handed out, mostly to the right people, but it didn't really matter 'cause everyone got the same gifts as everyone else. Wrapping paper flew, someone got poked in the eye with the corner of a cardboard Monopoly box, no one waited to see what anyone else had got, and everyone just wanted to be done as fast as possible so we could leave. Of course, no one wanted to be the first to leave, 'cause that meant next year Grandma'd "accidentally" forget to give you that year's commemorative edition of Monopoly, and let me tell you no one wanted to miss out on that. So the chaos continued, and no matter how fast you finished, you had to stay put, and not a soul could move until the Cowboys had officially lost or the Western credits rolled.

It was in the middle of this raccoon dumpster chaos tornado introduction to the family that I looked over and realized, squeezed into a spot no wider than a commemorative box of Monopoly turned skinnywise between me and my Uncle Byron, I realized Becca had fallen asleep. I don't know how. I don't know when. To this day, Uncle Byron swears that's when he knew she was The One. I think she just shut down. Her brain saw all that going on around us and noped right out. I was impressed, and then looking around the room, every pair of eyes I caught looked at me, then looked at her with jealousy, then looked back at me. We all wanted to go to there, which was, conveniently, not here. Anywhere but Grandma's sitting room. Finally, on the TVs one set of Cowboys lost and another set won, the big cousin crammed wrapping paper in front of the broken couch leg to hide the damage, someone reached for the door handle, and before I knew what was happening, Becca and I

were sitting in the car, coats wrapped tight, and she looked at me and said, “What. Was. That.” And for the first time in what seemed like a decade, I breathed. And I felt my balled up hands loosen and my arms hang and my face unscrew. “That,” I said, “that was Christmas.”

You know, most years in the whole leadup to Christmas, I’m excited and then Christmas comes, and that’s a big party, and then the Sunday after Christmas just feels like a welcome breather. It’s an easier way of doing things than the chaos tornado of Grandma Sue’s sitting room, but y’all know it’s never easy pulling Christmas together even around here. I keep on saying it takes a village to raise a church, and Lord knows that’s true about holidays. Y’all pulled off another good one, and I gotta say, not once did I worry that someone was going to mention anything about Monopoly, so all in all, I’d say, pretty good. But this time around, excitement wasn’t where I was. This time, I was anxious. From Thanksgiving when my sister came up to Becca’s work trips to meetings and services and being in the office and all those places Christmas takes a priest to, this whole season, I’ve been anxious. You see, It was December 23rd when I got Covid last year, and this year I wanted so badly to get to Christmas. I wanted y’all to have Christmas, God knows you deserve that bundle of joy. And selfishly, I didn’t get Christmas at all last year, so I really wanted it for me, too. I was so nervous the whole of Advent that I was gonna get it again. And I worried in the middle of the night what would happen to you or me or this church if I did get sick again, or even if I didn’t get *sick* sick but tested positive and couldn’t come in. I worried that all this healing and breathing and sabbathing we’ve been doing would have to start over. Or the momentum we’re trying to rebuild would get derailed. Or that somehow the chaos tornado would just take over altogether and St. Thomas’ would never be the same. And then Christmas came. And no, it wasn’t the sitting room nightmare, thanks be to God, but somehow it was the joy-spllosion of other years. It was, and that “was” was nothing short of the miracle my soul needed.

You know, now that I say all that, I think I missed something this Advent. I think I missed the good ol’ fashioned reason for the season. What I mean to say is, I let myself get into one of the worst places a priest can get. I let myself believe that the existence of the Church or the arrival of the Christchild or even the open doors of this place, I let myself believe that they could not happen without me. And worse, maybe I let myself believe that they happen because of me. Not a lick of that is true. I love this place, and I try my best. And you do, too, and Good God Almighty, don’t we all know you’ve tried your best and then some these past twelve months. But you know what? While we are here because of our faith, this place is here because of God. My Lord, don’t we need that reminder. And I’ll tell you why: this place will be here no matter what happens. No matter what happens to me, or to you, no matter what the paint looks like or the sidewalk or the mailing list or whatever. There can be a typo here and there, I can stutter over words I’ve said nearly a thousand times, Christian could hit a wrong note (I mean, theoretically. We all know that won’t happen), but you know what? It could. And if it does, it’ll be okay. We’ll be okay. God’s got this. If the last year has taught me anything, it’s just that. St. Thomas’ is gonna be okay. We’ve got some things to do, of course, I’m not letting us off the hook. But we’ll be okay. There’s a whole lot of God in this place, and when it comes down to it, that’s what matters. I guess once Advent was done taking me on its anxiety tornado ride, Christmas landed me gently back in the manger where everything slowed down and we could all just breathe together. Mary pondered all the wonders there in her heart, and I wonder if that’s not where I should’ve been the whole time, too, pondering in my heart. Worry’ll do that, though. It’ll take away your warm place to ponder.

I don’t know what this year will hold. There are times that sentence would make me anxious. But not today. Today, as I take Mary’s example and ponder in my heart, I’m just grateful. I’m grateful to be back, I’m grateful to be back in this pulpit, back on my own two feet, back hollering out weird stories, back buzzing around the office and figuring out how to get this whole place back on track, too. And you know what? I’ve gone and done it again, haven’t I. Even pondering, I’m trying to make things happen and forgetting that God’s

got this. I'm afraid if I keep going, I'll make the entire state of the world solely my own fault, so I'll sit down and try not to break any couch legs in the process. But one last thing before I do: remember why we're here. Remember our love for each other. Remember the hope at our core. Remember the faith that holds us tight, and the God that keeps us going. This year, treasure these things and ponder them in your heart. And remember, in spite of the chaos, we'll be okay. God's got this. Merry Christmas.