

A CHILD OF HOPE

A homily by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Thank God that Christmas is almost here! Yes, I know, there are only six more shopping days left and you need every one of them because you haven't yet checked your list even once. Nonetheless, I'm desperate for Christmas to arrive.

Why? This is a dark time of the year, and for many of us, it's been an exceedingly dark time for our nation and our world. I'm not going out on a limb when I say that we've never needed Christmas more — and if we did, it wasn't by much. We need tidings of comfort and joy, which happily happen to be the promise of Christmas.

What's the source of comfort and joy at Christmas? All signs point in the same direction, whether it's the song of the angels, the talk of the shepherds, the location of the star, or the journey of the wise men. As the Christmas story goes, all point toward a stable in Bethlehem, where a child has been born — a child of hope. The light of hope redeems a dark time not through the proclamation of a prophet, or the edict of a king, or the discovery of a scientist, or even the sale of a toy or a tie or a video game. It comes through a child.

Several weeks ago, I received an email from someone who had attended All Souls on the recent Sunday when I preached about the jester who lost his jingle. In her email, she told me that she's a social media producer who produces what she calls "puff pieces" — humanitarian stories — for a major television network. She had become somewhat discouraged with her job, she said, because she tended to follow the dominant view among journalists that producing feel-good stories was less important than producing traditional news. Along with her email, she included [a video link](#) of one of her recent stories.

It tells about an 82-year-old Georgia man named Dan Peterson. His wife died recently, and he had fallen into a deep depression. He spent days just staring out the window, watching the squirrels. He had no purpose, he says. He was just waiting to die.

After six months in this malaise, Dan found himself at the grocery store one day, standing near the end of the canned vegetable aisle. He hates grocery shopping, he says, and by all accounts his expression reflected his aggravation.

Without warning, this unapproachable man was approached by a 4-year-old girl named Norah, who was sitting in a grocery cart being pushed along by her mother. As the cart passed Dan, Norah suddenly sat up and said to Dan, "Hi, old person! It's my birthday today!"

Dan, who admits that he was having his own private pity party, smiled for the first time in a very long time and said to Norah, "Well hello, little lady! How old are you

today?” They chatted for a couple of minutes, and then Norah evidently decided that Dan needed a hug, and she reached out and gave him one. Then they went their separate ways.

In case you think Norah is one of those children who speaks with everyone she sees, her mother insists that she’s not. But a few minutes later, Norah decided that she wanted a birthday picture with Dan, so she and her mother tracked him down. Dan and Norah posed together and then hugged again like long-lost friends. As they parted, Norah and her mother thanked Dan for his time.

In response, Dan teared up and said to them, “No, thank you. This has been the best day I’ve had in a long time. You’ve made me so happy, Ms. Norah.”

Dan has been smiling ever since. Norah and her mom visit Dan at least once a week. And while Dan has his own grandchildren, they are all grown and gone. And while Norah has her own grandparents, Dan has a special place in her life and in her heart.

For his part, Dan believes that Norah is an angel. She has given him a reason to live, he says. He wants to see her grow up and blossom into a wonderful young woman.

To Dan, a child of hope was born. Norah somehow had the innocence and insight not to believe the scowl on his face. She somehow knew that all he needed was someone to care. He needed a hug. Even on his gloomiest day, he was listening for tidings of comfort and joy.

In my email response to the social media producer, I congratulated her for giving voice to this compelling story. I added, “I think stories like these are in some ways even more important than ‘hard’ news in times like these. People need to be reminded of what it means to be human – that we are made of human connections. And your stories do precisely that.”

At its best, Christmas reminds us of what it means to be human. When the spirit of the divine takes human form, wonderful things happen. People who are lonely find a source of belonging, people who are depressed find a source of joy, and people who are fearful find a source of hope. As the poet William Blake reminds us in his poem cycle, *Songs of Innocence*, we experience the presence of the divine only when it appears in human form. Blake writes:

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Our part in the Christmas story, this year and every year, is to be children of hope, no matter our age. Look beyond the frowns and scowls on people’s faces. Rise above the frenzy and chaos of the season. Laugh sometimes, smile often, and love always. If you do, the Christmas spirit we so desperately need will be born once again.