

Christmas Eve 2007

During Advent, many gathered together on Wednesday nights, around the prayer, “Come Lord Jesus, Fill us. ... Fill us with your love. Fill us with your light. Fill us with your peace. And fill us with your joy.” Love, light, peace, and joy are the gifts Jesus brings to us. Gifts that fill this season, so tonight, I invite us to pray for one more gift. One that actually underlies and frees us to share and celebrate all the rest; tonight we pray, “Come Lord Jesus, Fill us with hope.”

I don't know about you, but this year has been especially hard to gloss over the sorrow and struggle that walks with us this season, even with all the singing and celebrating and Christmas cheer. Most years, we can ignore the difficult things in our lives or the world, as we turn our attention to random acts of kindness, festive decorating, gatherings with friends and families, and the 24/7 caroling. But, this year the sorrow hung close to the surface with shootings, loss of those close to us in the community, illness, and you can probably add to the list.

Or maybe you would like me to stop bringing things down and get back to the stories of good tidings and cheer. But, that world doesn't need saving or hope. That's the thing about this Christmas story, with all its familiarity and

all the ways it has been captured in chorus and paintings and pageants, we forget that the world Jesus was born into shouted their praises and followed stars, because he came into their real need and sorrow and fears and gave them the gift of hope that only the birth of a baby can bring. This gift of hope that helped them see a way that would not lead to despair.

A story called, “One Cup at a Time”:<sup>1</sup> It is shared by a man who recalls a Christmas he celebrated while in prison.

The guards had placed a Christmas tree – roots and all – in each unit. The idea was for the men to make the decorations to go on it out of whatever they could find. Creativity was to be our only limit, with the winning unit awarded soda and popcorn.

The tree sat in a corner for a whole week. It seemed to be a symbol of the stripped dignity we all felt, being incarcerated at this time of year. Remarks were made by the inmates passing by, as to what the staff could do with their tree. I, too, fell victim to the overall gloom that seemed to match the gray-colored snow clouds outside my window. My longing for home ... made my spirits sink to an all-time low. ...

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Dodrill, submitted by Tom Lagana Chicken Soup For the Soul: Christmas Treasury (Health Communications, 2001) p 22-25.

I walked out into the open space of the unit and sat down on a chair to watch the others pass by – going nowhere. ... Straight ahead was the tree, its branches brittle from neglect. Pine needles lying on the floor told of its need for water and even I, foul mood and all, could not deny a tree a drink of water. I went to my cell, got my cup, filled it in the sink and walked back to the tree. I was almost afraid to move a branch for fear of it cracking. Its need for water was worse than I thought. After several trips of carrying water, one cup at a time, a lifer by the name of Buck came forward with a bigger cup full of water.

*All the water in the world ain't gonna help these roots,* I thought.

Just then a young man named Shorty handed me another cup of water. Several dozen trips for water were needed before the roots showed evidence of being saturated. Shorty poured in another six or seven cups, filling the bottom of the tin tub that held the tree.

“Just in case it wants a drink of water later,” he said.

As we stood around like medical interns who had just saved our first patient, it was Shorty who said what we were thinking. “It looks kinda [bare], doesn't it?” “I guess I could dig up somethin' ta

put on it,' Buck grumbled. "I'll make the rounds and see who can help," said Shorty, ...

I retreated to my cell with old memories of grade school running through my head, when glue and paper were crafted into wondrous masterpieces that Mom displayed with pride. My eyes shifted to a roll of toilet paper I had stashed in a corner. Then I went and hunted for a bottle of glue I had long since forgotten I had. ... [In the process, I discovered old letters from my lawyer with false promises of a fast retrial and freedom.]

The letterhead was printed with big gold stripes that ran down each left-hand border. A spark of creativity connected some remaining brain cells of mine that had been dormant for far too long. I mixed the glue with warm water to make a milky soup. Then I took the toilet paper and unrolled a handful. By dipping it into the mixture, I could squeeze it out and roll long skinny sticks. I then bent each into the shape of candy canes. I dried them out on the heater and then trimmed the gold edge off the lawyers' letters, *finally good for something*, and wrapped each candy cane with a gold stripe. *A fine*

*job, even if I do say so myself.* They looked good enough to eat – all 24 of them.

As I stepped out into the unit, I was surprised to see a crowd of people around the Christmas tree. Buck was coordinating the trimming with all the tact of the cruise director on the *Titantic*. Handmade paper chains and ornaments were being hung everywhere. Cotton balled up into the shape of a snowman, a potato chip bag shredded as tinsel. The tree looked beautiful after a few hours. ...

Our unit one first prize, and we enjoyed the soda and popcorn. Our tree was planted in the yard for everyone to enjoy, with hopes it would survive the winter. It did. The following summer was a hot one. A drought killed everything, everything but the little Christmas tree, which somehow stayed watered all summer. Men carried water to it, one cup at a time.

The gift of hope that pierces our lives and allows us to believe dried roots can still take in water and bring forth life. Hope that transforms our depression, sadness, loneliness, and feelings of going nowhere and moves us to try again. And not just for our own sake, but especially for the sake of others. Or as Jim Wallis said it, “Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change.”

And finally, the piece I often ignore or forget or set aside, because there is too much to do or the problems seem so big, ... but hope works best one cup at a time. Or as I learned early on, along this Advent journey, from a wise, generous judge, “Inch by inch is a cinch, but yard by yard is hard.”

Hope came as a very small baby, in an out of the way place. By word of mouth and acts of love, this gift has taken root around the world. Sometimes we hesitate to act upon this gift of hope, because what stands before us seems so big, but through individuals offering what they have, one cup at a time ... new life springs forth. Like Saturday, in the midst of the craziness of winter travel challenges and last minute Christmas touches, George our organist, called me because he and his wife had won a turkey dinner and did I know someone who could use it? All those in need I knew had received the Christmas baskets on Thursday ... I'd have to think about it, but then the

doorbell rang and another member was there, asking about how to connect with the food pantry for a coworker, who would not admit she needed help. Suddenly, the hope that had eluded much of the season was making her appearance and sparking the possibility of a joyful Christmas dinner for a mother I'll never see.

Hand by hand ... heart by heart ... one cup at a time ... we share this living water Jesus pours out upon this thirsty world and we grow and we see the evidence change toward new life ... and His everlasting peace.

Let us pray,  
Our hope and expectation,  
    O Jesus, now appear;  
    arise, O Sun so longed for,  
    o'er this benighted sphere.  
With hearts and hands uplifted,  
we plead, O Lord, to see  
the day of earth's redemption  
that sets your people free! Amen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Text: Laurentius Laurentii, 1660-1722; tr. Sarah B. Findlater, 1823-1907, alt. *Rejoice, Rejoice Believers* verse 4.