

GRAVEN IMAGES**December 7, 2008****READING: "Christmas Wants" by W. Waldemar W. Argow**

What do you want for Christmas? Of a truth, the answer to precious few questions serves so completely as a clue to the mystery of the human heart.

At other times of the year we may dissemble and make-believe, but at Christmas our true nature reveals itself and we act from the hidden motives that dominate our lives.

Come with me this blessed Yuletide season and let the heart confess those wishes it has ever longed for, but never dared express. Aye, what is it we truly want?

I want a few faithful friends who understand my loneliness and who make it less, not by what they say but simply by what they are.

I want a growing capacity to appreciate and respond to the uncomplaining suffering of others, knowing that they fight as hard a battle against odds as ever I do.

I want a mind unafraid to travel, though the trail is not blazed, and a heart willing to trust, even when faith seems the most unreasonable of efforts.

I want a sense of duty tempered with compassion; a conception of work as a privilege; an instinct for justice tempered with mercy; and a feeling that responsibility is my debt for the opportunity of living in a day when great ends are at stake.

I want tasks to do that have abiding value, that make my life a lot better and the world a little brighter.

I want a sense of humor, including a sense to laugh much, often at myself; the grace to forgive and the humility to be forgiven; the willingness to praise and the capacity to respond to greatness and glory.

I want a glimpse of verdant hillsides, the never-resting sea, the horizon-seeking plains and the sound of a bird lifting my spirit higher than any bird can fly.

I want a few wistful moments of quiet amidst the raucous noises and feverish fret of the day, and when twilight descends like a benediction I want a sense of an abiding and eternal reality whose other name is God.

OFFERTORY / Anthem

In the name of the good works and continuing life of the church the offering will now be received.

SERMON : Graven Images

Pearl Harbor Day for many of us is merely a chapter in our history books, a time our parents or grandparents remember so vividly and will never forget. So close to Christmas, it remains for some a very real sadness that maimed and took lives, fragmented families and was a reminder of the damage and horrors that befit the aftermath of wartime and have seeped into the lives of every generation. My generation grew up with Korea and Vietnam, and The Gulf War, This generation has grown up with terrorism and many have found the effects are similar for those whose loved ones have served in the military or at professions of safekeeping and returned home with recollections imbedded in their memories that are far from joyful. And there are those who did not return, leaving families to struggle with not only loss but with the expectation of attempting a joyful participation in the festivities of this season of light.

Be it through conflict, or disease, separation or accident, any loss of a loved one regardless of how close or how distant in time, the holidays can be a difficult exercise in finding joy where there appears to be little to be found in the memory of those who will not be joining them.

This morning I would like to share with you a story, the irony of which you will soon understand.

In December of 1988, I was a seminary student at Manchester College Oxford, England. My new Testament Professor was having a good day, and he really liked my essay that week, and in a moment of uncharacteristic

kindness he canceled my next and only tutorial before Christmas.

That meant that I could fly home for the holidays early so I traded in my ticket for a seat on another flight.

The travel agent was delighted and said there was a Syracuse student who would be very grateful to know a seat had just opened up.

On the morning of December 21, 1988 as I sat in my parents living room, sipping my coffee, warm and safe, reveling in the expectation of my families holiday gathering. I turned on the television to be immediately shocked and by the graphic ruins of the smoking remains of Pan Am flight 103 that exploded over Lockerbie Scotland. It was the very flight that I would have been on, had my professor not thought kindly of my essay and sent me home early.

My thoughts turned to the families of all the Syracuse students and victims, waiting for the call from the airport on the planes arrival for the Christmas break, They did not expect a visit from the local authorities revealing that their loved ones would never come home.

Every year since, I have thought of the horror those students faced in their last moments and, the wrenching agony on the faces of their families. I thought about what it would have felt like had I been on that plane and what would have happened to my spirit and my soul once my physical life was gone.

How I thought, do those left behind live through this, and find the courage and will to even get up in the morning? One woman answered that question for me, Susan Lowenstein, the remarkable sculptor of Dark Elegy who created the likeness of each of the grieving mothers of the students who were lost in Lockerbie. She herself, was a parent of who lost her own son on that flight, and somehow turned her grief and despair into the making of those remarkable sculptures. I have been told that this extraordinary tribute is so moving and powerful that total strangers, upon discovering this field of figures amid the broken dreams, find themselves instinctively reaching out to hug one another.

When I first heard of Dark Elegy I vowed that someday I to go to Syracuse and to see them.

When arrived here for the first time in June after an unexpected call from this church as your Interim, I went immediately to the campus to the Lockerbie Memorial. It was very important for me to visit, as every year at Christmas my thoughts wandered to the events that unfolded on Dec 21, 1988 and finally I had a reason to go. On Thanksgiving day I ventured out to see 4 of the Dark Elegy statues that had been returned to Syracuse for the 20th anniversary. Sadly they had been removed as the statues are a moving memorial and would have been frozen into the ground upon the first frost and were sent back prematurely. It was enough just to be in Syracuse on the 20th anniversary.

Not all of us are as talented as Susan Lowenstein, and able to take what grief we feel in times of tragedy and turn it into such a loving, healing and poignant tribute to the ones we love. But her example of courage and expression lends itself to so many possibilities of ways to cope and heal.

My own healing in an indirect way, has come in just being here among you.

And the time I was blessed to spend on the campus at the memorial. This Christmas the families will gather again on the 21st, to remember and to share with those who have also lost loved ones, to be in the company of others who understand the enormity of their grief and loss.

Of all that Susan Lowenstein did for these families the most important was to allow for the emotion to come forth and to bring together those who would have suffered alone, had she not had the foresight to share her talent and love for her own son in the way in which she did.

Sometimes we need be reminded that bad things can happen because we are natures creatures.

Life can inflict the harshest, the most painful of circumstance upon the best of people without judgment or consideration. Our intelligence, or assessment of the fairness of such a blight is irrelevant, what remains is

our ability to accept the fact that all we really have is one another. And in those times our purpose is to reach out and touch each other in any way we can. Through Susan Lowenstein's own transformational suffering she gave a tremendous gift to others and I believe that is what we are here for. Yet there are times when we must face those moments or hours or even days of remembering and sadness that no amount of creativity or interaction can seem to dispel.

Yet there is quite another way to think about all of this...

Many years ago my nephew John then at the ripe old age of five, observed a simple natural occurrence that helped me formulate my own beliefs about life, death and change. It happened one Christmas time. We stood, just the two of us, by the plate glass sliding door watching the first flakes of winter land on the deck. As they faded and melded into minuscule puddles, my nephew John adjusted his glasses, and stared at the graceful transformation of fluffy white snowflakes into a glistening translucent liquid. His little hand reached over and took mine. It was one of those moving and fleeting moments that one never forgets.

The early evening stillness of dusk, the crisp cold colors of a new winter sunset, a passing cloud making snow all by itself with no visible batteries installed or electrical cords attached to reveal it's source of power.

"like beautiful magic, isn't it," I said.

John looked up at me and scowled seeming somewhat puzzled by the obvious scientific ignorance of my sophomoric remark. "No," he said, "Its not magic, its molecules."

He went on to explain in amazing detail, with an uncanny accuracy, as to exactly how the molecules, which are tiny and invisible move very quickly or slowly to change form, from the frozen crystalline shape of a snowflake into droplets of water. Then he added thoughtfully, " like when you die. You're not gone, your molecules are still here they just look different. Nothing ever goes away forever."

Later on that evening as the first boxes of Christmas decorations were

brought down from the attic and unpacked John spied his favorite, the four spinning tin angels powered miraculously by the heat from five small candles. As we set it up John settled against the coffee table, head in hands, and lapsed into his childhood reverie once more, waiting for the warmth of the candlelight to bring the little angels to life again, just as he remembered it a year ago. Matches were finally found and the candles lit, ceremoniously one at a time.

Slowly the tin cherubs began to move like horses on a carousel and picked up speed until they were nearly horizontal, each one tapping the center bell with a shepherd's crook as it passed.

John studied them with the same intensity he had in observing the snowflakes earlier in the day. Around and around they went faster and faster. "Molecules," I said, intending to convince him that I heard every word he said about how snowflakes become water postulating that heat works in the same way expanding and contracting the air molecules to create currents, speeding them up in the heat and slowing them down as the air cools. I was prepared for this one.

Again the same puzzled look appeared on his face. "Molecules?" He said, as if I were nuts. "No, not molecules ... " his voice trailing off muffled by the clanging of his favorite decoration. He glanced back at the bell... I waited patiently for the rest of his thought as his finger traced the smoky path left by the flying angels. " Not molecules, " he repeated ... "It's magic.

"Magic is invisible and makes you happy. Molecules are invisible too but they can't make you happy!"

Together we watched the candles burn down in a communion of silence. I had absolutely nothing to say. but an awful lot to think about. John's metaphor of molecules and magic gave me just the insight I needed. I loved his explanation that nothing ever fully disappears from our lives or goes away without leaving their molecules behind, in every breath or in every step we take around and though one another's path. A part of us always remains.

Why do some live, why are some spared and others suffer, I don't know. I do know that whatever set this all in motion put us here to hug each other more often than we do, to ponder at times the big unanswerable questions together, and to know for sure that many bad things that happen are unselective; and our choices in life are important regardless of what may await our demise.

Someday I will walk through the sculptured images of those who died in the Lockerbie flight,. I am sure all of the questions and doubts will come back to me. There will be a time again when I will wonder why them and not me. I have this selfish need to see how my mother might have been captured in stone.

I hope there will be someone there to hug. Who is as pained by the images as I am sure I will be, who won't ask any questions, who will grant me the solace of my own thoughts, alone, in the company of others whose lives have also been changed forever, in more ways than I could imagine. This Christmas as we enter this season light or darkness, may the memories of those we love be with us in ways that will bring the joy of their living back to us...ways that we can share, in the graven images we remember, in the molecules that assemble the beauty of a single snowflake, and in the magic that lifts us up and coaxes us out from under those moments of despair.

I would like to close with these words by Henry Van Dyke:

" Time is too slow for those who wait
Too swift for those who fear
Too long for those who grieve
Too short for those who rejoice.
But for those who love, Time is eternal.
Hours fly, flowers die, new days, new ways pass by,
Love stays.

**So be it ...
amen**

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