

Isaiah 12  
Romans 16:1-16

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333  
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Thanksgiving Sunday  
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## FOR ALL THE SAINTS

With Joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation, and you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted." *Isaiah 12:3-4*

Over the past fifteen years each Thanksgiving Sunday I've tried to take us on a brief pilgrimage of gratitude and remembrance for the panoply of good things that God has sent my way. We've had such sermons as "An Alphabet of Thanksgiving," on personal Bible's that have had real impact on me, "Thanksgiving from the Attic," "War and Thanksgiving," and a slew of others. This year I dip again into the well of memory to be grateful for those influences that spring less from events or themes but for that source for which all of us can be grateful—people; specifically for me, the people God has blessed in my path, without whom I would have been very differently formed. It's not ultimately about the people themselves, but about the way God discretely uses them in angel-like service.

In 1911, the year that Swedish explorer Roald Amundsen beat Captain Scott to be the first to reach the South Pole, and Ernest Rutherford discovered the structure of the atom, my mother, Helen Munn, was born into a world populated more by horses and carriages in the streets of Manchester than motor vehicles. One of seven children, whose father died in her teens, when she gets gussied up for a meal out at the Little Foxes Inn in the village, she still turns heads at 95.

After I had twice been hospitalized in isolation with scarlet fever as a three and four year old, and had no contact with anyone beyond nurses for weeks, my dad, a policeman was moved to a new town on November 5, 1952—bonfire night to every English child. Because school was well into the autumn term, she stayed home with me until I started school in January. It was perhaps the best two months of my life.

My parents were never avid church-goers—few were, given the relentless erosion of faith after two World Wars (my dad was a POW) in a largely ineffectual Anglican Church. Nonetheless, my mother insisted that I go to church, wisely understanding that I had to be immersed in my own faith journey if I was ever to decide about God for myself. And so for ten years I went to church, and back to Sunday School (always on Sunday afternoon), on through confirmation classes with Vicar Schofield in his long black "frock," as we called it, and then as an altar boy for communion. Now and then I'd catch my mother's beautiful contralto voice soaring from the front pew or, kneeling, her shining silver white hair (a fixture since her late twenties) beaming her presence.

Years later, when I was 25, I was abruptly arrested by God's Spirit while on leave from Cunard Lines. Some time after I returned to my ship, my mother and my dad began quietly attending church regularly. To this day, she faithfully attends her dying little village church on England's northwest coast.

My Dad was more of a surprise. In 1977, when Jane and I were at Princeton Seminary, they came for a summer visit. Each morning we had a brief devotional time. But one day, scurrying to get away for a day trip in New York, it got lost in the shuffle. Then my Dad, sitting patiently in his adopted place on the sofa, asked, plaintively, "Aren't we going to have our prayer

time?" I almost fell over. I never forgot the quiet sincerity from which it came. Seven years later, with family gathered around his hospital bed in our home town, I gave him communion for the first and last time. The grateful heart does not relax its grip on such memories.

For a simple, honest upbringing, for their love, their standards of honesty, decency, fairness and courage, and especially for the quiet implacable resolve to do what was right before God, I am deeply grateful.

I have two brothers, seven and ten years older. Geoff, the middle brother, was only the second in either family, that I know of, to get a university education. An honors graduate of Manchester University, he went on to a distinguished career in education. It was Geoff's love of reading and literature that—probably still unbeknown to him, inspired my love of learning and literature. He was the "silver fox" who read scripture at Carolyn and Michael's wedding. Throughout life, Geoff was always—and often only—the most consistent churchgoer.

My eldest brother, Peter, like me left school at age fifteen and joined the Royal Navy (where I went in the Royal Air Force because they had a great exhibition gymnastics display team, which I joined). Peter never showed any interest in religion, except perhaps to distance himself from it as far as possible. He had some tough breaks, a couple of failed marriages, a very serious accident to his right hand (like Katherine), and a series of mundane jobs. Then about seven years ago, shortly before he retired, he and his wife, Thelma, started worshipping at a nearby church called the "New Church." It had a tiny congregation, and was kept alive only by the faithfulness of the few and a hundred year old endowment. I don't want to say God started to go to work on Peter. I think its usually more cooperative than that. Peter has always had a love of learning at heart—he loves to research themes and learn new things, and the church, one of a movement that began after Swedenborg's death in 1772, inspired that quest. Swedenborg himself was a brilliant scientist, engineer, reformer, and mystic theologian. The mildly eccentric rustic Johnny Appleseed, who planted and tended orchards all over Ohio and across the Midwest, may have been Swedenborg's most famous American disciple. The teachings of the New Church, in many respects hardly differing from our own, became for Peter a pathway to God, and he took it. Five years ago, he wrote me that he and Thelma together had decided to train to become lay ministers in the church. It took them five years of copious studies and hundreds of 100 mile round trips to the New Church college near Manchester. This year, about his seventieth birthday, they were both graduated.

To see my oldest brother find his path to God in Christ, and find in that path such companionship and purpose, brings from my soul a chorus of immense gratitude. So many of us in our family, including my nephew Mark, a former senior executive with the International Red Cross, have come to know Christ by pathways so varied, yet so appropriate to each one's heart and inclinations. Which makes me think once again of the "many mansions" or dwelling places in heaven that Jesus speaks of, I interpret to mean in order to absorb that extraordinary diversity of pathways that take us to God's kingdom. And for all those disparate pathways among my own family, my heart sings a great thanksgiving.

As many of you know, in the early seventies, I served as a cruise director with Cunard Cruise Lines. At that time I had a profound spiritual experience while at home on leave. When I returned to the sea and to the less than monastic tranquility of the QE2, I spent each lunch hour on the sun deck, reading through the entire Bible over nine months—not your typical reading on a cruise ship. It was a setting without a hint of accessible Christian fellowship, yet my job was to constantly interact with the passengers. But the mere act of trying to explore one's faith with a vacationer on a cruise would have been tantamount to dropping a live roach into their dry

martini. Still, I kept looking for openings. Then along came James Costigan. James loathed flying, so when he had to travel between the U.S.A. and the U.K. it was often with us. He was a playwright, ultimately winner of two Emmys. The year I met him he won one for his script of “Love Among the Ruins,” which starred Lawrence Olivier and Katherine Hepburn. The second, the following year, was for the gripping account of friends in a Protestant and a Catholic family in Belfast during “the troubles,” people who watched their friendship wither under siege in “A War of Children.” There was a very personal association for me with that production, but that’s for another time.

One night, in the ship’s After Bar, James and I talked well into the early morning, until the band had packed up and gone to bed and the bar stewards hung up the last polished glass. We talked about faith—his Catholic upbringing, and my quest to give form and substance to the God whom I had encountered so vividly and so recently. We talked about playwriting and poetry, movies and great literature. Apprehensively, I shared with him that I had written a little poetry, which I had barely shared with anyone. He asked if he might read it. So early the next morning I slipped a slim file under his stateroom door. It was a long day. That evening, the file appeared under my cabin door, with a note that began, “I woke to poetry today . . .” and went on to construct a poem of gratitude and appreciation from words and phrase from my own poems. At the end of the piece he wrote of our mutual search for God,

It was there, for a moment, last night  
In the bar, of all the ungodly  
and unlikely places, at closing time.

And so he gave me a sense that I might have a voice, after all; something to say, and perhaps a gift to say it with. So I say, “Lord, thank you,” for those friendships and affirmations that spring mysteriously like quanta from the fabric of our lives.

There have been so many others, pole stars whom God provided, who helped me navigate a clear path when life was listless or unfocused.

Frank Shufflebotham (“Frank Shuff,” we called him, to save running out of breath) was my scoutmaster, who drew me and my friends like a magnet to an idyllic woodland camp in the lovely Forest of Bowland. He did what characterized the earliest Christian fellowship in Luke and Acts, drawing all who would come to fellowship around a rustic table. We knew we always had to work for our supper, and barely had the door to the general hut creaked open on my arrival, and the familiar woodsy dankness hit me, than his round red face would appear in the hatchway to the kitchen and he’d holler “Come on in, young Wilson, and peel the spuds!”

Each year our troop went camping on the hills above Arneside, at the edge of my beloved English Lake District. We pitched our tents in a little vale on the edge of the hazelnut forest beneath the “fairy steps.” And every Sunday Shuff would herd us, chafing at the intrusion into our spear throwing time and “capture the flag” games, to the old stone church in the village. Yet always we’d come away from the familiar liturgy feeling truer inside, as though the soul had been rightly edited. And it didn’t hurt that there’d be roast beef for dinner, and Shuff’s home made apple pie—and all this on a portable oven in an old Bell tent—with whole cream from the dairy farm nearby.

With so many others Christ has seasoned my path: teachers who taught me how to think, research and reason; friends through sunshine and storm; companions in faith; extended family, and others more surprising. My last sergeant in the Royal Air Force, for instance, a bull of a man

with a spiked crew cut like a horse comb, who stopped me on the stairs one day, I was convinced to ball me out. “Wilson!” he barked, two steps past me. I shot round, expecting the worst. *What now?* “Yes, sergeant”

“Wilson,” he said, fixing me with that laser stare, “You’ll do all right.” And he was gone.

One other, who watered the soil of reemerging faith when I was twenty five. A red haired, sunshine glowing teacher in a green dress with puff sleeves and big red ladybugs wandering all over (the fabric kind!). Standing on the dock in St. Thomas, she was on vacation from three rural schools in the poorest county in North Carolina, traveling with a lady friend. My Jane. “Janiebelle” her license plate reads, as does her presence. She wears her faith like a smile, and has long tended mine. She’s packed and unpacked our family seven times, and embraced five church families over thirty years as I’ve dragged the family hither and yon. She’s been my confidante, faith restorer, cheerleader, my best friend, and simply the best mother two girls could have. Once in a while someone asks me, “Is she always so cheerful?” Privately, she slumps now and then, like anyone. But every day, with or without the sun’s appearing, she reaches for the hand of God and *chooses* how she’s going to face the world, how she is going to be toward it. Then she makes it happen.

Your life is also gifted with the marks of others’ kindness, wisdom and caring. This Thanksgiving I encourage, no—more than that, I challenge you to write a note or make a call and let them know. Nothing quite lifts the heart like an unexpected call of gratitude or a note in the mail that takes the person completely, serendipitously, and touchingly by surprise. And if you do, I can guarantee that for someone it will come at a time when life seems to them to be at its hollowest, and you will be to them as a restoring angel. Make that call. Neither of you will ever forget it.

For all these things and more, O Lord, for those who today I lifted out of the fabric of this life, whom you have given me, and for this beloved place and these dear people—I give you my heartfelt thanks and praise. Amen.