

My brother’s name is Jonathan W. Pierce. He is a junior, which means my father’s name is also Jonathan W. Pierce. The “W” stands for Woodfin. It’s a family name—originally a last name—from my paternal grandmother’s side. Back in the late 1800s the Woodfin’s settled just a couple hours north of here in Marblehead, Massachusetts, an old whaling town on the beautiful Northshore that ends where the ocean begins. Admittedly, Woodfin is a peculiar name, and when my brother was in college down south, his roommates, Wes and Jason, spared no mercy in poking some fun at it, calling him everything from Woody to Woodster. But my brother, proud of his heritage and his namesake, wore Woodfin like a badge of honor, promising his roommates that one day he would take them north to Marblehead, and show them the street named after his family, the street called Woodfin. Well, a couple summers after they all were out of college, Jonathan got his chance when Jason and Wes came to visit. Jonathan wasted no time. On their first day in town, he took them to Nick’s Roast Beef in Beverly, to Singing Sands Beach in Manchester-By-The-Sea, and ultimately to Marblehead. Now it’s important to our story for you to know that Jonathan had never actually seen the street in Marblehead named Woodfin. As a family, we’d been to Marblehead a bunch, and he’d heard it was there, but he’d never actually seen it himself. So, rolling into Marblehead on Route 114 that day, with Wes and Jason still not convinced by his claim, Jonathan was relieved to find on the map Woodfin Terrace. “See, I told you it’s a real place. And it’s a *terrace*. Not a street, not even a lane, but a *terrace*. Only beautiful things are named terrace. And it’s a dead-end,” he added. “Probably a nice little neighborhood.”

A couple more turns, a bend in the road, and the moment of truth had arrived. There it was, a sign that said, “Woodfin Terrace: Welcome to the Town Dump.”

We are confronted tonight by a most unexpected sign. We set out several weeks ago—some of us—from our homes. We took to the stores and malls in search of Christmas. From there, we R.S.V.P.’d to a couple holiday parties—one work party and one with the cousins from the side of the family we never see anymore. A couple nights we stayed in and tried to do nothing. We watched Jimmy Stewart in “It’s a Wonderful Life” and then

flipped over to see Will Farrell playing Buddy the Elf. We sent-off a few cards, made a few phone calls, got back in touch with some friends we wish we'd never lost touch with. Some of us even found the courage to reach out yet one-more-year-in-a-row to those people who never seem to reach back. We stopped off and bought a tree. We got one for Grandma too, because she told us she wasn't going to decorate this year and we decided that's just not right. When we delivered the tree, we bought her some homemade cookies. We gave some to the neighbors and our kids' teachers at school as well.

It's been a long few weeks. We've packed a lot in and gotten a lot done, and for some of us it has us feeling a lot closer to Christmas. For others of us, we don't feel like we've gotten anywhere. Despite our best efforts, the Christmas spirit just never seemed to come this year. It's felt like a dead-end terrace. So, here we sit. Making one last ditch effort to make something happen, we show up in church to be greeted by a most unexpected sign: "To you is born this day a savior, who is Christ the Lord." Well that's not so bad. Actually, it looks pretty good. "And this shall be a sign to you: a child wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger." On second thought, maybe not so good.

In a world that has become as hard and cruel as ours, it's not exactly a sign of relief. It doesn't quite read, "And Here You Shall Find Peace on Earth." A child wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger. But where's the knight in shining armor? Where's the seasoned politician who can unlock the gridlock between parties? Where's the miracle-worker who can cure our cancer, mend our broken relationships, and build that better world we've been wanting for our children?

Sorry to break it to you, but tonight we are confronted with only one sign: a child wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger.

One of my favorite Christmas carols has to be "*It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.*" We will sing the first and last verse of it in just a moment, but my favorite verse is the one in the middle:

O ye beneath life's crushing load,  
Whose forms are bending low.  
Who toil along the climbing way  
With painful steps and slow  
Look, now, for glad and golden hours  
Come swiftly on the wing;  
Oh rest beside the weary road

And hear the angels sing.

Some of us have come a long way to get here tonight. Like Mary and Joseph, we've traveled many miles, if not along the road than in our hearts. We've heard God say, "You are favored, you are holy, and I'm coming to lift you up," and we want to believe it's true. But the signs all point to a dead-end. Others of us feel like we've been parked at a dead-end forever. But here we are, all together with Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds and the angels, and that pesky innkeeper who was maybe just too tired to open the door and squeeze yet one more person in. We're all here in the place where all signs point to a child wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. And what a good sign it is. For here in the manger is a baby, a new-born, opening his sleepy eyes to the world. There is no weariness, no exhaustion of body or spirit that this baby will not experience in his lifetime; no weakness or sorrow that he will not heal and ultimately redeem. For now, though, he comes simply as a sign that something is different in the world tonight. That at the end of the dead-end street, where things go to die, life is beginning again. That in the cold darkness of this night, something is creeping in: light. Could it be a sign from God? Could it be God? I dare say, find out for yourself. Follow the sign to Bethlehem and see where it leads.

O ye beneath life's crushing load,  
Whose forms are bending low.  
Who toil along the climbing way  
With painful steps and slow  
Look, now, for glad and golden hours  
Come swiftly on the wing;  
Oh rest beside the weary road  
And hear the angels sing.

Amen.