

One day last week I wandered into my office at the church to discover that a plant I've had sitting on my desk for over 4 years was dead. Like a lot of people during this time, I have not been in my actual office as often as I used to be. But I was just in there a couple weeks ago and my plant was still alive and kicking. I mean, it didn't look like a daffodil in spring, but this is winter, and a season of pandemic, so I was feeling pretty good that it had only a few brown leafy spots. I trimmed them away, gave it some water, and told it I'd be back soon. I guess soon wasn't soon enough. When I walked in on it last week, there was no green to be seen on it anywhere. It was droopy in all directions, and the soil looked like cracked pavement. Regretfully, I decided it was time to part with my beloved plant. It was beloved. On the day I started as your Minister at Four Corners Community Chapel, Lynn D'Adamo came by to introduce herself. "Here, I brought you this plant for your office." When I told Lynn I wasn't real good with plants and that there was a chance the thing would be dead inside a day, she told me not to worry. "It doesn't need a lot of water, just a cup-full once a week." Still, I think Lynn herself was a little worried when she left my office that day; worried for the plant, not for me.

It turned out, though, Lynn was right. I had nothing to worry about. That plant and I got along just fine. For a while, other than an ugly purple sofa and a couple bookcases, it was all I had in there. And every year, on the anniversary of my arrival in Cumberland, I'd look at that plant and smile, thinking about how good things really do last. That was up until last week, of course, when I discovered my plant was dead.

I didn't get all emotional about it, though. I humbly accepted that nothing goes on forever, and I took my plant outside to return it to its home in the ground. Then, I went back inside and took a picture of the empty pot to send to Lynn in a text message.

"After 4 ½ years, I'm sorry to say that the plant you gave me on my first day at the church is no more. I think it would have survived COVID just fine, but it couldn't

survive my irregular watering schedule during COVID. Come spring, I shall find a new flower or such to fill my pot with.”

Lynn messaged me right back.

“Like the rest of us, the plant probably missed the human connection more than the water. When you finally get back to the office, let me know, I’ll come and pot a new plant in the planter.”

What you need to know is that Lynn and her husband Paul, along with her mother Carolyn, are getting ready to move to New Hampshire in January. It’s a great move for them, one that will get them much closer to their own children and grandchildren. But Lynn, Paul, and Carolyn have been regulars in the pews at Four Corners for a long, long time. Their presence is their gift and friendship to us, and we will miss them. The good news is, in this brave new world of ours, we now have Zoom to help keep us connected. Of course, the power of Lynn’s message is that what we really need is something more: human connection.

Tell me I’m wrong, but isn’t this what we are celebrating tonight. That in a year of forced social distancing, where we have had to make hard decisions about who to see when, where, and why; in a year where loved ones have become sick, and too many died, without us by their side; where we have had to mark funerals, birthdays, and anniversaries on a screen from afar; where we have struggled to walk the fine lines between caution and fear, logic and felt need, hope and despair; in a year where we have felt the loss of jobs, security, closeness, tonight, we celebrate that the God of heaven comes to earth to make a human connection.

As the ancient hymn text puts it,

*“King of kings, yet born of Mary,  
As of old on earth he stood,  
Lord of lords, in human vesture,  
In the body and the blood.”*

No, Christmas does not mean the world is now fixed. That God has come in Christ to connect human to human does not mean our politics will now return to normal. It does not mean police brutality will suddenly cease. It does not mean we can simplify our messaging to say, “All Lives Matter,” at least not until black lives matter like all lives. It does not mean bread is going to fall from the sky into every hungry hand. What it does mean is that in the world tonight there is renewed hope and promise, for the incarnation of God in the baby born in Bethlehem is a sign not only that God has come, but that God has come to stay. If what we wish for, and have worked for and prayed for does not come to us today, fear not the angels say, there is hope for tomorrow, and the next day, and every day to come.

There is a story I heard once about a soldier who was captured on the battlefield and thrown into solitary confinement in a prison camp. All alone, a day is a week is a month is a year. You can go crazy and begin to forget yourself. To keep himself together, this soldier would sing into the dark of his loneliness. *“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”* Until one day the prisoner was free again.

Many years passed and one day he found himself sitting at a table sharing a cup of coffee with a complete stranger. The two got to talking and discovered they were both prisoners of war, in the same camp around the same time. “How did you do it?” the stranger asked from across the table. “How did you endure?” The man began to tell of how he’d sing into the darkness all day long. *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.* Looking across the table, the stranger appeared to be in a daze. A tear fell from his eye. “And you? How did you get through?” And the stranger said, “I listened to you.”

My friends, if what we wish for, and have worked for and prayed for does not come to us this Christmas, fear not, there is hope for tomorrow, and the next day, and every day to come.

It is the hope of a friend who says, "When the time is right, I'll drive down from New Hampshire just to put a new plant in your pot." It is the hope of soldiers singing songs into the darkness of night. It is the hope of the angels singing Glory into the darkness of this night. It is the hope of a God who comes down from heaven to earth to be with us, to stay with us, now and forevermore. Amen.