

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Are we alive, or just going through the motions? Christmas and the holidays, with the New Year on the horizon, are an intense time of the year. It’s not just the busyness—the rushed shopping, festive office parties, and the harried schedules around family gatherings. There’s more.

There’s expectation; there’s hope. There’s a fresh energy that yearns to break through, catch us off-guard, and take us to a new place. A place where our hearts can be touched, as if for the first time. A place where—perchance—the holy dwells. A place where, if we give ourselves a chance, we can be more alive than we ever imagined.

The Christmas story excites the imagination and the spirit at multiple points. To begin with, the improbability of it all. A struggling young couple at an unfamiliar stable ... and at every turn, tough choices and no easy grace. And all the while, the vile Herod menacing near by.

The vulnerability of it all amazes. And yet, this very vulnerability draws us in. It engages our imagination. A baby’s birth does this. It changes everything as it nudges us beyond ourselves. Always, there’s something so preciously sacred about a child’s birth.

Think about the birth of your children and grandchildren. They invite in us new life and new hope and expectation.

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Reflecting on our lives. Life is so mysteriously delicate, isn’t it? Its upendings and failings can scar us for a lifetime. Rushed divorces, poor choices around health maintenance; unanticipated illness and unforeseen fallen finances.

We have to pay attention. We have to anticipate what tomorrow might bring; and not just next week, but next year and next decade.

In the holy season that is upon us, all of this becomes intensified. It becomes magnified, as expectations are awakened once again ... to all the potential, to all of what might have been, what could have been but, sadly, is not.

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To do more than simply *go through the motions* in our lives, we have to imagine possible consequences—of everything. The energy of the holy days, with the New Year close behind, invites our imagination to take flight.

How can our stagnated relationships be made to work? How can our stifled careers be given new vision and purpose?

How can we be more fully alive? In many ways, this question is the question God seeks to answer at the *Bethlehem* manger. How, indeed, can we be more fully alive?

Part of the lingering ambiguity of Christmas is linked to this question. Always, the *holy days* are the best of times and the worst of times. Still, even though our lives are never perfect nor at their radiant best, the hope sounds out. The holy birth at *Bethlehem* gives hope a new face.

It invites us to imagine a new day; and in our imagining, to get outside the box and to think about our lives in fresh ways. So often our marriages don't have to fail. Our deepest relationships with children and parents don't have to go the way of estrangement.

The *holy days* invite us to learn once again how to long, how to yearn—that hope and possibility might be rekindled in our hearts. It's more than resolve and commitment. It's also a softening from within; a softening through compassion and the tenderness that comes from love's caressing of our spirit.

We're more fully alive when we realize that God's love is for us, too. No matter anything about our life situation. No matter our failings and flaws, no matter our triumphs and greatness. We, too, yearn for the fruits of new birth. A new birth that stretches our imagination ... that reminds us again that the way we most honor God is to be alive to hope and to life's enduring possibilities.