

December 26th, 2021
[Colossians 3:12-17](#)

This will be the first Christmas in 23 years that I won't lead worship. I always worked extra hard for Christmas. I wanted to make the sermon memorable, make it a moment in worship that would appropriately and magnificently celebrate the good news of Christ's birth. One year, at the church I served in North Carolina, I wove Longfellow's poem "I heard the bells on Christmas Day" throughout my sermon and set up an elder in the church's narthex to pull the rope on our old, hand-rung church bell as I escalated to my conclusion: "A voice, a chime, a chant sublime / Of peace on earth, good will to men." Another year, at the college I served as chaplain, I designed the sermon to conclude in complete darkness, except for a small, bright star that appeared on the wall behind the pulpit. I was especially proud, though, of my last Christmas sermon, when I memorized Osip Mandelstom's poem "And I Was Alive" and left the pulpit to recite it. I'm not gonna lie. Pulling that poem off was a rush.

This year, I will sit in a pew. As I have attended my local Presbyterian congregation throughout Advent, my new vantage point on worship has been an odd and wondrous experience. I have felt a mix of emotions. First, compassion and appreciation for those leading me in worship ... especially on Christmas. I understand the pressure to make Christmas Eve special – the pressure to perform for a larger than usual crowd – the pressure to convince those who only show up on Christmas and Easter that church is worth attending more than twice a year.

Unburdened, I have experienced worship differently this Advent. I appreciate the sermon, but also the poetic words of liturgy; the way familiar Scripture sounds different depending on the person who reads it. On Christmas Eve, my experience will be even more rich. I imagine the choir extra-animated by the spirit; the pine scent of the greens adorning the sanctuary; the hymns

that will leave me humming “O come, let us adore him”; the wax on my fingertips from the candle lighting of this silent night. All these elements of the service will contribute to my worship experience. But most important of all is what I will bring with me to church that night. The attitude with which I approach worship. The openness to receiving whatever gifts the Spirit has in store. It isn’t all up to the preacher or the music or the lights or the smells. Grace abounds and the Spirit shows up when we can transcend our vanity, our need to get everything right, our expectations of magnificence, and surrender to the unmerited beauty of Christmas.

As I read this Sunday’s lectionary text from Colossians, it occurred to me that these were good words to embrace this Sunday after Christmas and good words with which to move into the new year. Many will come to this particular Sunday service completely worn out by Christmas responsibilities heaped on top of another grueling year of managing life in a global pandemic. Colossians approaches these bone-weary souls and wraps them in the comfort of compassion, kindness, and patience.

The clothing metaphor of this passage refers to the early Christian practice of baptism. The old clothes of the person being baptized are removed, set aside, perhaps even destroyed. As the person emerges from the water, new clothes are put on.

On this particular Sunday, Colossians offers us a new garment to walk into this new year. We are to put on humility, setting aside unrealistic expectations for ourselves and others. We are to wrap ourselves in love and forgiveness. We are to give and offer grace. Christ gives us the gift of a great unburdening, a spiritual surrendering, a peace that can reign in our hearts. It’s not all up to us. Thanks be to God.

Questions for reflection:

1. What details of Christmas Eve do you remember? What did you hear, see, smell, feel?

2. What do you need to surrender in order to move into this new year with compassion, kindness, patience, love and grace?
3. How can you offer yourself more grace? How can you offer others more grace?