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Reflections for the Advent and Christmas Seasons

Decoration Celebration

Christmas lights twinkle and glow all around.
Sometimes, houses have lots of decorations outside.
Sometimes, we can see a beautiful tree through a window.
Sometimes, only one candle shines from a home.
But I understand now, about the lights of Christmas.
I used to think that people who put lots and lots
Of lights and decorations on their house were
The ones who loved God and Christmas the most.
I used to think that a bright house meant
That holy and good people lived inside.
I used to think that houses with just a single candle,
Or with no decorations at all, meant that
Scrooge people lived there, who didn't celebrate the Lord.
Now, I am older.
Now, I am wiser.
Now, I understand.
That Jesus is the true Light of the World.
When we decorate for Christmas,
We are showing signs of friendship with God,
And with others by inviting them to share our Light.
Some people don't have a lot of money for
Lights and decorations, but they have good hearts,
And they celebrate with prayer and kindness.
I love to look at all of the Christmas lights,
But I know not to judge about people
By how their house looks outside,
Because it's what's inside that really matters.
The Light of the World is Jesus,
So we must shine from our hearts for Him.
Then, even if we don't have the money to decorate,
Santa will see the brightness of our home, and
He'll know where to stop in the dark of the night.

Mattie J.T. Stepanek

December 25, 1997 (7 years old)
Reflections of a Peacemaker
(Andrews McMeel, 2005)

*"We must do more than pray. We must meditate
on being faithful.*

And we must share our faithfulness with others."

Mattie J.T. Stepanek

1990 – 2004

Mattie's life had many challenges – constant health issues, daily struggles with his rare form of muscular dystrophy, financial burdens and more – but his Catholic faith, nurtured by his mother, Jeni, and enriched at Holy Rosary Church in Rosaryville, Maryland, kept him rooted in the Lord.

From a very young age, Mattie insisted that God spoke into his heart. Sometimes, the messages strengthened Mattie's spirit as he coped with the loss of his siblings and other personal challenges — including disability, bullying, and a growing awareness of a lack of peace in our world. And sometimes, he said the messages were meant for others, to help them remember and realize their *Heartsongs* or "unique reason for being," and to know God's presence in the world – even amid challenges.

Mattie's lasting gift to us is his belief that we all have what he called a *Heartsong*, a special purpose given to us by God. His life especially inspires children and teens to accept their personal challenges as they uncover their own *Heartsong* in their daily walk with God.

Many of Mattie's poems and passages began as expressions and prayers he shaped after a moment of private meditation or conversation with God.

He accomplished a great deal in his "almost 14 years" on earth. He published six bestselling



books of poetry and one bestselling book on peacemaking. During his many television, radio, and print media interviews, Mattie spoke with authority and conviction, championing what he learned as a Catholic.

Through his writings and speeches and his everyday conversations and interactions, Mattie reminded youth and adults, and families and leaders that *hope is real, peace is possible, life is worthy, and prayer is powerful.*

In 1998, in preparation for receiving his First Communion, 7-year-old Mattie created a Lenten meditation booklet with daily Bible readings and personal responses. In 1999, he added a “foreword and forthword,” writing in part:

“As you move through Lent and Holy Week, I encourage you to ponder and reflect on the Bible verse suggested for each day. Then, give praise through your personal response to the verse. And finally, choose to reach out with the Message, by

sharing your *Heartsong* with others. Share God through your words and way of living, every day.”

And in the spirit of Mattie’s gift of his Lenten Reflections, the Mattie J.T. Stepanek Guild offers these Reflections for the Advent and Christmas seasons. Advent itself represents hope. The first candle we light on the Advent wreath is called the Hope Candle when we remember the Prophet Isaiah and prepare for – hope for – the coming Messiah.

Mattie wrote and spoke often on hope because he believed. Mattie held on to his faith and his hope throughout his life. He loved his Catholic faith and the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation.

Three of Mattie’s poems have been chosen to go with three selected daily Bible readings across the Advent and Christmas seasons. We also offer a reflection on the readings and poem through the lens of each of the theological virtues.

A Thanksgiving Day Reading

Consider the Virtue of Charity

“We love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God. Charity upholds and purifies our human ability to love, and raises it to the supernatural perfection of divine love.” *Vatican website*

Reading 1 (Sirach 50:22-24)

And now, bless the God of all,
who has done wondrous things on earth;
Who fosters people’s growth from their mother’s womb,
and fashions them according to his will!
May he grant you joy of heart
and may peace abide among you;
May his goodness toward us endure in Israel
to deliver us in our days.

Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 145: 2-3, 4-5, 6-7, 8-9, 10-11)

R. I will praise your name for ever, Lord.
Every day will I bless you,
and I will praise your name forever and ever.
Great is the LORD and highly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.
R. I will praise your name for ever, Lord.



Generation after generation praises your works
and proclaims your might.
They speak of the splendor of your glorious majesty
and tell of your wondrous works.
R. I will praise your name for ever, Lord.
They discourse of the power of your terrible deeds
and declare your greatness.
They publish the fame of your abundant goodness
and joyfully sing of your justice.
R. I will praise your name for ever, Lord.
The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and of great kindness.
The LORD is good to all
and compassionate toward all his works.
R. I will praise your name for ever, Lord.
Let all your works give you thanks, O LORD,
and let your faithful ones bless you.
Let them discourse of the glory of your
Kingdom
and speak of your might.
R. I will praise your name for ever, Lord.

Reading 2 (1 Corinthians 1:3-9)

Brothers and sisters:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always on your
account
for the grace of God bestowed on you in
Christ Jesus,
that in him you were enriched in every way,
with all discourse and all knowledge,
as the testimony to Christ was confirmed
among you,
so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift
as you wait for the revelation of our Lord
Jesus Christ.
He will keep you firm to the end,
irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus
Christ.
God is faithful,
and by him you were called to fellowship
with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel (Luke 17:11-19)

As Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem,
he traveled through Samaria and Galilee.
As he was entering a village, ten persons with leprosy met him.

On Being Thankful

Dear God,
I was going to thank You tonight
For a beautiful sunrise,
That was pink behind the fog down the hill,
And for a wonderful rainbow,
That I ran under pointing to
All my favorite colors,
And for such a great sunset,
That sparkled orange across the water.
I was going to thank You tonight
For all of these special gifts,
Except that none of them happened.
But do You know what?
I still love You, God,
And I have lots of other things
That I can thank You for tonight,
Even if You didn't give those
Very special gifts to me today.
It's okay, God,
Because I'll look for them all again,
When my tomorrow comes.

Amen.

Mattie J.T. Stepanek

November 1995 (five years old)

Journey through HeartSongs (Hyperion, 2002)



They stood at a distance from him and raised their voices, saying,
“Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!”
And when he saw them, he said,
“Go show yourselves to the priests.”
As they were going they were cleansed.
And one of them, realizing he had been healed,
returned, glorifying God in a loud voice;
and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him.
He was a Samaritan.
Jesus said in reply,
“Ten were cleansed, were they not?
Where are the other nine?
Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”
Then he said to him, “Stand up and go;
your faith has saved you.”

Reflection

As we enter the season of Advent, we are called to slow down. We don't have to come to a full stop, but pause now and again throughout our day and listen to God. We give Him thanks, remembering the great gift He gave us.

This is a season of expectation and of appreciation; a time when we prepare ourselves for the gift of Jesus Christ. Our Lord God and Savior loves us and only asks for love in return.

He made each one of us in His image and made us perfectly. We are just who we are meant to be.

God wishes joy for our hearts and peace for the world. Peace and joy.

How do you experience joy?

Can you have a joyful heart without being at peace within yourself?

How do you carry your peace and joy forward?

A Reading for Advent

Consider the Virtue of Faith

“We believe in God, all that he has said and revealed. We must not only keep the faith and live on it, but also profess it, confidently bear witness to it, and spread it.” *Vatican website*

Reading 1 (*Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10*)

The desert and the parched land will exult;
the steppe will rejoice and bloom.
They will bloom with abundant flowers,
and rejoice with joyful song.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to them,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the LORD,
the splendor of our God.
Strengthen the hands that are feeble,
make firm the knees that are weak,
say to those whose hearts are frightened:
Be strong, fear not!
Here is your God,
he comes with vindication;



with divine recompense
he comes to save you.
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared;
then will the lame leap like a stag,
then the tongue of the mute will sing.

Those whom the LORD has ransomed will return
and enter Zion singing,
crowned with everlasting joy;
they will meet with joy and gladness,
sorrow and mourning will flee.

Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10)

R. Lord, come and save us.
The LORD God keeps faith forever,
secures justice for the oppressed,
gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets captives free.
R. Lord, come and save us.
The LORD gives sight to the blind;
the LORD raises up those who were bowed
down.
The LORD loves the just;
the LORD protects strangers.
R. Lord, come and save us.
The fatherless and the widow he sustains,
but the way of the wicked he thwarts.
The LORD shall reign forever;
your God, O Zion, through all generations.
R. Lord, come and save us.

Reading 2 (James 5:7-10)

Be patient, brothers and sisters,
until the coming of the Lord.
See how the farmer waits for the precious
fruit of the earth,
being patient with it
until it receives the early and the late rains.
You too must be patient.
Make your hearts firm,
because the coming of the Lord is at hand.
Do not complain, brothers and sisters,
about one another,
that you may not be judged.
Behold, the Judge is standing before the gates.
Take as an example of hardship and patience, brothers and sisters,
the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Enter the Season

*The season is upon us now,
Let us enter, here is how ...*

*Come in joy to celebrate.
Come in hope for future's sake.
Come in gently, open-hearted.
Come for unborn, and departed.
Come in happiness and mirth.
Come with faith that serves the earth.
Come in kindness, come forgiving.
Come to share the gift of living.
Come in patient, calm, assuring.
Come with grace and trust enduring.
But most of all, let's come in peace,
The dark of angry hurt, release.*

*The season 'tis upon us now,
As we enter, let us vow ...*

*For young and old in every land,
Let us come joined hand-in-hand.*

Mattie J.T. Stepanek

*December 10, 2000 (10 years old)
Reflections of a Peacemaker
(Andrews McMeel, 2005)*



Gospel (*Matthew 11:2-11*)

When John the Baptist heard in prison of the works of the Christ, he sent his disciples to Jesus with this question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me."



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As they were going off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: *Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you.* Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Reflection

Advent continues and Christmas nears. There are undercurrents of excitement that often break through to the surface. We must learn patience.

And what of the excitement of the 10-year-old boy, Mattie, who wrote *Enter the Season*? Was he excited for presents and treats? Perhaps, sometimes. But he usually gave away his presents to others. The excitement Mattie writes about is an excitement for the closeness of our Lord; for

renewal; for hope; for peace; for fulfillment of the promise of the gift of Baby Jesus.

These are the true gifts our Lord gives us through His love for us. And the gifts that God gave each and every one of us. We all have gifts to share with the world. We all have gifts from God. Together, we are whole.

What are your gifts? What is your purpose? What is your *Heartsong*?



A Christmas Reading

Consider the Virtue of Hope

“We desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing trust in Christ’s promises relying on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Hope sustains during times of abandonment and opens the heart in expectation of eternal beatitude.” *Vatican website*

Reading 1 (1 *Jonah* 2:29-3:6)

If you consider that God is righteous,
you also know that everyone who acts in righteousness
is begotten by him.

See what love the Father has bestowed on us
that we may be called the children of God.

Yet so we are.

The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Beloved, we are God’s children now;
what we shall be has not yet been revealed.

We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him,
for we shall see him as he is.

Everyone who has this hope based on him makes himself pure,
as he is pure.

Everyone who commits sin commits lawlessness,
for sin is lawlessness.

You know that he was revealed to take away sins,
and in him there is no sin.

No one who remains in him sins;
no one who sins has seen him or known him.

Responsorial Psalm (*Psalms* 98:1, 3CD-4, 5-6)

R. All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.
Sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done wondrous deeds;
His right hand has won victory for him,
his holy arm.

R. All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation by our God.
Sing joyfully to the LORD, all you lands;
break into song; sing praise.

R. All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.
Sing praise to the LORD with the harp,
with the harp and melodious song.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
sing joyfully before the King, the LORD.

R. All the ends of the earth have seen the saving power of God.



Gospel (John 1:29-34)

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said,
"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the
sin of the world.
He is the one of whom I said,
'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of
me
because he existed before me.'
I did not know him,
but the reason why I came baptizing with water
was that he might be made known to Israel."
John testified further, saying,
"I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from
the sky
and remain upon him.
I did not know him,
but the one who sent me to baptize with water
told me,
'On whomever you see the Spirit come down
and remain,
he is the one who will baptize with the Holy
Spirit.'
Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son
of God."

Reflection

In this Christmas season, we celebrate joyfully.
We sing to the Lord a new song – for we
understand what ‘new’ means. What the Baby
Jesus means. What the Baby Jesus brings.

And thus, we also are creating the foundation
for the future – a foundation of God’s love, of
God’s promises, of God’s hope. We are setting
the path forward as we build this foundation.
We are preparing to move beyond this world.

We use our breath, our ears, our hearts for the
Lord. We are the children of God.

How will you use your gift? How will you use your purpose? How will you use your *Heartsong* for
hope and faith and peace?

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Resolution Blessing

*Let our breath be gentle wind,
Let our ears be of those who listen,
Let our hearts be not ones
That rage so quickly and
Thus blow dramatically,
And uselessly.
Let our spirits attend and be
Most diligent to the soft
Yet desperate whisper of
Hope and peace for our world.
Let our souls be those
Which watch for the Lord,
Waiting with wonder and want.
Let our eyes be attentive
With interest and respect,
Let our minds be committed
To health and happiness,
Let our hands join
In helpful resolution
To being our best person,
Praying and playing and
Passing through moments
Of pain or memory-
Makers of pleasure
Touching the future, together.*

Mattie J.T. Stepanek

January 1, 2003 (12 years old)
Reflections of a Peacemaker
(Andrews McMeel, 2005)

