
I Give Thanks for the Gradual Return of Incarnation!

(The Annual Report of the Dean)

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler

Advent 2 – Year C

The Sunday of the Annual Parish Meeting of the Cathedral of St. Philip

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.
—Philippians 1:3–4

“I give thanks for you whenever I remember you.” It happens again that the annual meeting of the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip occurs on the Second Sunday of Advent, and these mighty words from Saint Paul, to the Philippians, are our text for the day.

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you.” It is generally thought that Paul wrote these loving and tender words while he was in physical strain, while he was in prison. And yet, even in prison, Saint Paul used the word “joy,” or some version of “rejoice” some 27 times in this short letter. Paul was able to speak of joy even while in prison.

As I review our past year here at the Cathedral, I remember that we, too, have been in a kind of prison. The Covid-19 pandemic has imprisoned us all, in some way or another; and I have preached about our imprisonment several times in the last eighteen months. This beautiful Cathedral has struggled with our constraints and limitations. Our community life has not been easy.

My annual report this morning could well be just a summary of some of my past sermons: about prisons, about remembering, about “First: no judgement,” about caring, about peace being contagious, about the need for in-person community, about loving.

This morning, however, I want to claim these words of Saint Paul, for myself and for all of us. I want to remember this past year as one of giving thanks whenever I remember each of you.

This is a season to give thanks. In the great mystery of spiritual life, I have learned that giving thanks releases us. Giving thanks releases us! And we so need to be released these days.

It’s a pleasant coincidence that, in America, the Thanksgiving season almost always blends into Advent. That is fine with me. The tremendous fertility of Advent can be about giving thanks, and giving thanks can be like planting seeds. Giving thanks can be the beginning of things. The seeds of gratitude can be the beginning of new birth! The gratitude of Advent can grow into the holy new life of Christmas!

I thank my God every time I remember you. Giving thanks is a blessed gift. Several weeks ago, I was reminded of the old saying: “Gratitude is wealth; complaint is poverty.” We have had plenty of complaint this past year, and legitimate reasons to complain! But the time has come for gratitude, for giving thanks. The time has come for the wealth of gratitude.

In prayer and in joy, I remember each of you who has been committed this past year, committed and faithful to this complex Cathedral community, in all our diversity and hopes and laments. You have stayed with each

other, loving and caring for each other as you were able. Thank you!

I give thanks for those of you who have taken the time to support not only me, but also the other clergy of the Cathedral, and I give thanks for you who have supported the many members and friends of the Cathedral. I give thanks for some extraordinary gifts of financial generosity in the past several weeks!

I also remember those of you who have been mad at me, or mad at the bishop of Atlanta, or mad at the Episcopal Church, or mad at the government, or those of you who were mad at the people who were mad! And I give thanks for each of you, one at a time, name by name. Today, I want to remember each of you, and thank God for you.

Last year, December of 2020, we conducted our annual parish meeting outdoors, in the Lanier House labyrinth. It was hard, and we were going through some difficult leadership anxiety. But we made it. For Christmas of 2020, we ended up offering seven different outdoor services of worship; on Christmas Eve at 10:00 am, 12 noon, 2:00 pm, 5:00 pm, 7:00 pm, and 10:00 pm, and then on Christmas Day at 10:00 am. In those twenty-four hours, it was rainy, then windy, then snowy, then windy, then really cold! At the late service, the cold wind blew the canopy off from over our altar! (However, neither the Covid-19 pandemic nor the weather could stop the Feast of the Incarnation!)

(The following paragraphs were part of the annual parish meeting remarks, but not part of the sermon:) Those were the outdoor services. We were also, simultaneously, conducting online services, productions that had taken days to develop. Last Christmas, and throughout this past year, I give thanks for liturgy production team: people like Cathy Zappa, Dan Murphy, Brant McCaskill. But also David Rocchio and Trammell Williams and Sandra Ortega and all our sextons, and the ever faithful chief usher, Rod Bunn. They were all amazingly diligent and faithful and efficient, setting up and setting down.

I quoted First Corinthians, chapter thirteen during these ordeals: "Love bears all things. Love endures all things." We faced challenge after challenge, from pandemic caution to human anxiety. Love endures all things. And so does thanks!

For much of the pandemic, our Cathedral worship has been restricted, but I give thanks that many ministries were safely open. The Cathedral Farmers Market hardly missed a Saturday. The Cathedral Book Store was open. The Cathedral Counseling Center and Thrift House were safely open. The Cathedral Preschool had a couple of sensitive times, but ended up serving amazingly well. I give thanks for the faithful parochial ministries of the Cathedral of St. Philip.

On March 14, 2021, we were able to worship indoors for the first time in a year. What a tearful and moving moment of thanks that was! When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream! But that meant that our clergy and staff were producing three kinds of worship services each Sunday: indoor, outdoor, and online. I am thankful that the Cathedral of St. Philip had, and has, the amazing resources to serve so comprehensively. Not every Episcopal Church has the space and resources to minister as we did, but it sure took a lot of work!

Regretfully, we said good-bye to some important people during the frustrations and anxiety of this past year. We accepted with regret the unexpected resignation of the Reverend Nate Huddleston. I give thanks for him, and his ministry here. We also said good-bye to the fine and faithful Priest Associate, the Reverend Bill Harkins. I am thankful for his long tenure at the Cathedral, and for his continuing service at the Cathedral Counseling Center. We also celebrated the formal retirement of the Reverend Carolynne Williams, though we still enjoy her warm and pastoral presence.

By April of last year, however, we were able to welcome a new Director of Youth Ministries, Mr. Keith Dumke. What a delight it has been to welcome him into our large Cathedral community. I give thanks, with great joy, for his talented aptitude and his gracious attitude!

I give thanks for our annual Cathedral Antiques Show, which raised more money than it ever has, in its forty-year history. That money went to fund a renovated kitchen at City of Refuge.

Sadly, in July of 2021, we returned to the protocol of wearing masks inside the Cathedral building. It felt like a setback to our hopes, but we persevered. We also lamented the deaths of many faithful parishioners, among them Mr. Bobby Helton, a truly devoted servant of the Lord and of the Cathedral; for years, I enjoyed calling him our true Archdeacon! May he rest in peace.

By September of 2021, we were still averaging over 200 worshippers at each of our major Sunday services.

And we were also using the time to strengthen our building. Thanks to David Rocchio, we installed new carpet throughout the Cathedral, a new T-coil hearing loop in the Nave and in the Parish Hall. We repaired water leaks and removed acrylic coverings on our outside stained glass windows. They are beautiful projects!

I was thankful in September to receive an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from the Sewanee, the University of the South. I thank the present Vice-Chancellor there, Reuben Brigety, but also former Vice-Chancellor John McCardell and former dean of the School of Theology, Neil Alexander.

As of December, 2021, I am giving thanks for the gradual return of Incarnation. I give thanks every day and every week that people are returning, physically, to the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip. Almost every week, it seems, I see someone who I have not seen in over eighteen months. Each of them usually says, "Well, I've been online and I've sure seen YOU!" And that is true. I give thanks for our online presence and prayer.

But I also give thanks that we are gradually returning to incarnational community. On November 28, 2021, we allowed the wearing of masks to be optional inside the Cathedral building, for vaccinated persons. We still encourage the wearing of masks, because many of the children in our community have not yet been permitted to receive vaccinations. As always, we are encouraging people to be as fully vaccinated as possible. Thank you!

Yes, I know that screens are a way of life for many of us. We have needed online presence and Zoom meetings and such. But I also know that screens are flat. My new saying is that "Flat screens make flat people!" Flat screens simplify us negatively, often reducing us to mere opinions and statements and positions. Flat screens do not deliver the fullness of personhood to each other; flat screens do not deliver the fuller mystery of human interaction. The Christian Church is an incarnational church, and we need to be with each other fully, in the flesh. That is what "incarnation," "incarnatus est," means: "in the flesh."

We will get there, in time. I give thanks for that hope. We will resume the full dimensions of in-person community and prayer. And we will resume the full dimensions of Holy Eucharist. The word "Eucharist," we remember, actually means "Thanksgiving." I give thanks for each of you, in anticipation of that day when we can fully give thanks to God with the incarnate versions of ourselves instead of the flat screen versions of ourselves!

Yes, Advent is about budding incarnation. God's incarnation is being born and our incarnation is being born, too. We are growing into the full, and full-personed, in-person, Body of Christ.

(The sermon ends here. The parish meeting remarks continued with:) Of course, I give thanks for my own spiritual support this past year, in the people of the Cathedral leadership. I give thanks for George Maxwell, whose service in administration and care continues to be invaluable to me and to the Cathedral. I give thanks for Cathy Zappa in pastoral care and in her distinctive leadership in this past year's liturgical planning, for Lauren Holder in community and education. I give thanks for Dale Adelman, and his extraordinary musical and pastoral leadership. I give thanks for Juan Sandoval and Thee Smith and Julia Mitchener. I give thanks for the ever durable service of Lisa McNamara (and her amazing arrangement of so many individual baptisms this past year!). I give thanks for David Rocchio and Dan Murphy and Jeannie Mahood and Trammell Williams, and the full Cathedral staff!

I give thanks, finally, to my own family, extended as we have been, throughout this pandemic. I thank God for Boog, my wife; we actually got to sit together often in church this past year, participating in online prayer from our living room! What a treat!

Here's to next year, 2022! May the seeds of thanksgiving that we plant this Advent become the growth of new life this Christmas. And may this new life continue to blossom, fully and incarnationally, in the year 2022!

Grace and peace to you always, and thanks!

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip