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"O'er the hills of Bethlehem, in the dark of night ...  
everything in sight is shimmering and glimmering and  
bending towards the light."

This is a lyric from "**The Jazz Nativity**" – a performance of the story and carols of Christmas in the uniquely American musical form of jazz. The story is told by a soprano and a jazz vocal group. The band is an eight-piece jazz ensemble. The magi are two instrumentalists and a tap dancer. It is indeed an unusual and exciting combination of jazz, opera, theater and dance. I am so pleased to be asked to sing in this performance for the second time this year when [it comes to Central New York and St. Mary of Mt. Carmel / Blessed Sacrament Church on December 20](#). (You can also see more pictures at the link from last year's show.)

A year ago, I had never heard of "The Jazz Nativity." As a person who always looks for the musically avant-garde when it comes to church or liturgical music, I was delighted to have the opportunity to learn of the wonderful work of Anne Philipps, the composer of this lively performance. It was a highlight of my Christmas season in 2016 and I anticipate it will be again in 2017.

It was a highlight, not just because of the wonderful, talented and spirited people who helped bring this lively presentation of the Christmas story to life, but because its very vibrancy renewed in me, those who presented it, and the packed church who added their own life to the performance, a precious reality in short supply in today's world: *exuberant hope*.

The celebration of Advent and Christmas are full of the promise of hope: hope for a future; a world where those who suffer have their wounds – physical, mental, and spiritual – salvaged, where even those who cause suffering a pain in our world might yet still "bend towards the light." However, the Christmas story is not one that ignores the realities of those who suffer, nor does it explain away the consequences to those who inflict suffering. Recall that in the midst of the Christmas story, one of the most brutal accounts of the Bible is told - of a ruler living in fear, who slaughters babies to destroy Jesus, his perceived rival. This slaughter is part of the story of Christmas, though often not so much in the selective memory of Christmas carols. The Christmas story invites us not to avoid the realities and damage caused by human-inflicted suffering today in distant lands, our own land, or in our very own neighborhoods and homes, but to *respond* to them with a capacity for hope.

The hope shared in the Christmas story does not, fortunately, come from fragile human egos or through the promises or desires of politicians or others who misunderstand and mislead because their lives are turned inward in selfishness, hatred, or fear. The Christmas hope comes from the One who, it is said, "mild lays his glory by." It is a reminder that the power of God, present in a helpless infant, a desert-wanderer, a compassionate preacher and healer, a falsely accused prophet, and a man suffering a horrible execution as an enemy of the state is "born that we no more may die." In a world that seems often determined to crush hope to earth, we celebrate the coming of Jesus who raises up, not in some escapism from the wounded lives we have, or the wounded planet we struggle to preserve for ourselves and future generations, but to be day-to-day ambassadors of exuberant hope. The hope shared in the

Christmas story is about the love that comes from beyond us to save us and, having done so, never leaves our side.

“Look how it shines o'er the manger; look how the darkness has waned  
replaced by the light, the blessing, the miracle.”

We can live in exuberant hope even as we cope with the different wounds we all bear. It means that we can find ways to “bend towards the light” and help others to do as well. It is embracing the joys we find in the everyday, but also recognizing that sometimes we or others we love don't “bend” easily, willingly, or at all towards the light. We can see bleakness in such times, or even despair, or we can see more deeply how the “darkness has waned” even if only for a moment, trusting that a dawn is nearer than we imagine.

“And on this night in Bethlehem, on this holy night ...  
we may see the world begin a' bending towards the light.”

The reason we can embrace exuberant hope at Christmas, and every day, is because of the One who came and helped us all “bend toward the light.” The subtle shift of words in this signature tune of “The Jazz Nativity,” noted above, reminds us of the fact that the hope was not only 2,000 years ago; it is now: “this night,” and this moment. “We may see the world begin a' bending towards the light,” NOW. Right now. Every Christmas is *that* Christmas.

***May it be so for you, and me, and our world!***

On a personal note, 2017 was a busy year full of challenges, opportunities and joys:

- I continue to teach as a semester-to-semester adjunct professor in the Department of Theology & Religious Studies at **Marymount University** in Arlington, Va. an introductory theology course to the undergraduates entitled “Theological Inquiry.” The course serves as a basic introduction to theological method, a broad introduction to the Christian worldview, critical reading of the Bible, and the relationship of Christianity to Judaism and Islam. I am grateful for the opportunity to refine the course and make it my own this past year, and I find the challenge teaching new college students a good chance for me to expand my own capabilities.

On a related note, I presented a paper in March at the **Mid-Atlantic Region of the American Academy of Religion** which I was pleased others found relevant for today: an examination of how the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador – currently on the path to sainthood in the Catholic Church – through his ministry during his three year tenure, worked to establish a counternarrative to “post-truth” efforts of the corrupt Salvadoran government to undermine and discredit him. I am pleased to say this essay, along with others of my colleagues at the conference, were selected for inclusion in an anthology which will come out in 2018, **marking my first in-book academic publication**. Furthermore, with the recent passing to eternal life of one of the theologians who was the focus of my doctoral dissertation – Dr. Gregory Baum – and the previous death of the other theologian I focused on – Fr. Patrick Granfield (in 2014), I am being encouraged to look at publishing that dissertation as is or in modified form. I will be investigating this in the coming year.

Additionally, I continue a focused search for a full time academic position – a search that is now entering its third year, a testament to the fact that, although you might not think it to be the case, competition is very high for a very limited number of possible theology teaching positions. I appreciate your continued prayers and thoughts in this effort.

- My work with **Perisphere Media** has continued strong throughout 2017. This website design and digital communications studio has grown steadily since I helped found it in 2012 with my colleague Matt Smith. We recently have added additional team members to respond to our clients' needs and I am pleased to be part of this team of professionals who take pride in our work. This work continues to allow me interaction with organizations and groups that I might not otherwise engage and so broadens my appreciation for the importance of finding creative ways to tell their stories / missions online. I also continue my part-time work for the **Conference of Major Superiors of Men** – a national resourcing organization to male Catholic religious communities throughout the country. They are based in Silver Spring, Maryland. Between Perisphere, Marymount, and CMSM, my work schedule is often quite full!
- February brought me to Baltimore for the annual **Mid-Atlantic Congress**, a ministry-training and networking activity for Catholics in the greater D.C. / Baltimore / NJ / Delaware / PA regions. I was able to reconnect with a number of friends and colleagues. In November, the weekend before Thanksgiving, I participated in the national **American Academy of Religion Conference**, held in Boston this year. I did not present, but made a number of new connections with theologians and religion scholars, and heard many excellent presentations reminding me of the depth of interest and capable scholars in this field. In April, as part of my work with the Perisphere Media team, I helped lead digital communications again for the **Ecumenical Advocacy Days** conference here in D.C., with its focus on addressing racism and militarism in society and policy. Finally, I participated at the annual conference of the **College Theology Society** held this year in Newport, Rhode Island at Salve Regina University, in early June.
- April brought me to Utica to participate in and help serve as a master of ceremonies for **Holy Week services at St. Mary of Mt. Carmel / Blessed Sacrament Church** – an always inspiring time and an important ministry connection for me in the midst of my other activities. I continue to look for ways to expand my ministry consultation opportunities.
- I was able to take an early pre-season baseball trip to **Miami** to see the **Washington Nationals** in their new shared spring training facility with the Houston Astros at **The Ballpark of the Palm Beaches**. At the same time, the quadrennial **World Baseball Classic's** first round was being held at **Miami Marlins Park** and my friend Matt and I got to take in games between the U.S. and Columbia, a U.S. vs. Dominican Republic game that brought well over 40,000 "exuberantly hopeful" Dominican fans in a game that felt like a World Series, and a more subdued U.S. vs. Canada game. The U.S. team went on to win the Classic, thanks to some Nationals players and all-stars from other teams. I was also able to connect with my good friend **Rani Biswas** while in town, before returning to D.C. at the beginning of the **March blizzard**. It made me realize that those who go to Florida in early March might be on to something!

Aside from that trip, there was plenty of baseball in Washington, D.C. as the Nationals cruised to a fourth National League East title before falling in an oh-so-close **National League Division Series** against the then-defending World Series Champion Chicago Cubs. It was D.C.'s fourth loss in the first

round of the playoffs, a difficult record to be sure, but an enjoyable season all the same. I also got a chance to see the **New York Yankees** and phenomenon **Aaron Judge** play at Camden Yards in Baltimore against the **Orioles** near the end of the season. During the November American Academy of Religion conference in Boston, [I was able to steal and afternoon to get a tour of historic Fenway Park.](#)

On the side of my hometown of Utica, NY, 2017 marked the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth season of AHL hockey there as the **Utica Comets** fell short in the first round of the postseason. Their home barn, the famous Utica Memorial Auditorium, got an expansion of seating as the 2017-18 season began. This is my fourth year as a Comets season ticket holder, a ticket which I share with family and friends in the area when I am not able to go to games.

- As a fan of the science fiction and fantasy show *Doctor Who*, it was a great year. At a small convention specifically for *Who* fans in Rockville, Maryland in April, I was able to meet and get autographs of several stars from the classic show including **Katy Manning** (Jo Grant) and famous current stars such as **Ingrid Oliver** (Petronella Osgood). I was also able to get a photo with and autograph from the Seventh Doctor himself, **Sylvester McCoy**. A really special event for me was in July, when at the D.C. pop culture convention **Awesome Con** I was able to meet and get a group photo (below) with recent-past *Who* stars: **David Tennant** (The Tenth Doctor), **Catherine Tate** (Donna Noble), and **John Barrowman** (Captain Jack Harkness). It is always an exciting event but this meet and greet was a special moment.



- In July, [I was able to visit](#) the **National Museum of African American History and Culture** here in D.C. - and its reputation for a powerful, moving presentations of the history of slavery, the civil rights movement, and cultural contributions of African Americans did not disappoint. A few weeks ago, I

also visited the **Museum of the Bible** – which was a mix of very well done presentations of history and some very lame and even scholarly questionable presentations. July also brought me to a **James Taylor and Bonnie Raitt concert** at National Park. In August, I had a blast at Baltimore's Modell Performing Arts Center where a live show of one of my favorite spoof comedy shows **Mystery Science Theater 3000** was held! August 21 also brought the **partial solar eclipse** where a partly sunny day allowed me to enjoy the 83% eclipse on a very nice day outdoors. September's **Buffalo Nite** held by the New York State Society on Capitol Hill (and organized by their planning committee on which my good friend **Jennifer Rahm** works) was a great event to connect with people from Western New York, **Saint Bonaventure University** and more.

- My extended family is well, and I was able to spend significant time with my mom, Aunt, cousins' families and more in Utica on various trips, as well as some significant time with cousins' families and friends in a week-long vacation at **Ocean City, New Jersey**, which included a great concert by **Graham Nash** (of Crosby, Stills and Nash). I always enjoy spending time with cousin **Debbe** and her husband **Tom** and their son **Dominic** (age 14) as well as my cousin **Bob**, his wife **Crystal** and **Alex** (age 17), **Ana Capri** (age 5) and goddaughter **Victoria Marie** (age 3).
- I've been able to enjoy time out with friends throughout 2017, including special events marking milestone birthdays, new homes, and, in October, the wedding of friends **Joseph & Sarah Elacqua**, celebrated in Utica. In particular, the opportunities I have to spend with my good friends **Andrea Kramer and Kenneth Wong** and their children, **Simon** (age 11) and goddaughter **Monica** (age 9) are always a joy.

I am grateful to receive all of your cards this time of year! If we haven't been in touch, do reach out! I would love to hear from you! And you can follow my activities on my website [churchMD.com](http://churchMD.com)! Merry Christmas and blessed 2017!