

WELCOME TO WEEK 42 OF THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF LA JOLLA'S AT HOME WORSHIP EXPERIENCE. PLEASE FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS IN THIS GUIDE TO ASSIST IN YOUR WORSHIP EXPERIENCE. PLEASE PROVIDE US WITH FEEDBACK IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS. YOU CAN REACH US AT PASTOR@LAJOLLAUCC.ORG. THIS IS CHURCH. THIS IS HOLY. THIS IS HOW WE RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGES OF OUR DAY.

Today's At Home Worship experience is led by Rev. John Benbow, our church's Minister Emeritus.

THIS WILL BE VERY MUCH UNLIKE WHAT YOU ARE USED TO IN CHURCH. THAT IS ON PURPOSE. THIS IS SOMETHING NEW AND BECAUSE OF THAT WE'VE TAKEN LIBERTIES TO PROVIDE YOU WITH SOMETHING TOTALLY DIFFERENT. ENJOY MUSICAL SELECTIONS YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE HEARD AT CHURCH BEFORE AND A MESSAGE UNLIKE THAT WHICH IS DELIVERED FROM THE PULPIT. CONSIDER IT AN ADVENTURE. YES, YOU ARE MAKING HISTORY TODAY.

PLEASE FIND A COMFORTABLE AND COMFORTING PLACE IN YOUR HOME OR SOMEWHERE ELSE YOU FEEL SAFE. GET COMFORTABLE, POUR YOURSELF A GLASS OF SOMETHING SOOTHING AND ENJOY THIS EXPERIMENT IN WORSHIP....

WE PREPARE OUR HEARTS AND MINDS FOR WORSHIP

ENJOY NINA'S PRELUDE BY CLICKING THIS LINK:

<https://youtu.be/ZYvqkdqtell>

ON THIS FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS, LET US SEEK TO WORSHIP GOD IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH. LET US PRAY:

New every morning is your love, great God of light, and every day you are working for good in the world. You have blessed us again with the gift of the child born in Bethlehem. Awaken us to love you as he did, and to serve one another and the world as he led us to do. Lead us, above all, to pray with hearts and minds the prayer that he taught us.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen.

FINDING GOD IN VOICE

ENJOY BRONWYN'S SOLO BY CLICKING THIS LINK:

<https://youtu.be/rL2DouYr59s>

WE HEAR FROM SCRIPTURE...

Luke 2:22-35, The Presentation of Jesus

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'),²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's

Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,
²⁹ ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.’

33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

**FOR A VISUALIZATION OF TODAY'S SCRIPTURE,
PLEASE CLICK ON THIS LINK or copy it into your
browser:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SswGxaRo3dw>

“Insomnia”

A Story for Christmas

(John Benbow's note: I wrote this for the church's Christmas Eve service in 1992. At the end of the hard year of Coronavirus and the disruption and sorrow of the pandemic, it seems as appropriate as it did 28 years ago.)

On the last Christmas Eve of his long life, Daniel Simms had the very dickens of a time falling asleep. Problems with sleep were nothing new to him. He was 91 years old. “As old as the century,” he always said when anyone asked, as if it was any of their darned business. Ninety-one. He never thought he'd live that long. In fact, he hadn't planned on it at all. “I've got what's left of my money, what's left

of my health, and what's left of my mind," he'd once said to a friend. "I just hope to heck they all run out at the same time."

As for his money, there wasn't much of it. Even with Medicare, a serious illness of any duration would wipe out his savings. He was proudly able to stay in the house he had bought for a few thousand back in the forties. As for his health, he knew his luck was running out, but he was still healthy enough to avoid moving in with his daughter or into a retirement home. As for his mind, as he'd often said, "You can't lose what you don't have." He had lately fallen into the unfortunate habit of deprecating his memory, if not his mind—but the fact was, he had an excellent memory, not for what happened this morning or last week, but for things that happened in 1905, 1920 or 1940.

He thought of all those things, and a lot of other things besides, as he lay trying to fall asleep on Christmas Eve. "Funny," he thought after what seemed at least an hour of insomnia, "I can sleep like a puppy with the TV on full blast, but the minute I turn it off I'm wide awake at staring at the ceiling. If I stay awake any longer I'm going to have to get up and go to the bathroom again."

Now there was an ordeal. Reaching for his glasses, finding the aluminum walker the doctor had sentenced him to use for balance and support, and padding his way across the room to the bathroom door. Abandoning the walker to grasp the door handle with one hand and the towel rack with the other. And then, a few minutes later, the trip back across the chilly floor to bed.

He put off the bathroom journey, trying to ease himself into an hour or two of sleep, but the more he thought of the cold floor, the more he realized that not even his electric blanket was keeping him warm enough. So he combined the trip nature made necessary with a side-trip to the closet, where he pulled down an old wool blanket from a shelf, balanced it on the walker, and returned to bed. It took a lot of effort to get the blanket situated on the bed, but he finally managed it, and lay under a flannel sheet, an electric blanket and the old wool blanket, wide awake but warmer.

The old wool blanket was as rough to the touch and as ugly to the eye as it had been for three quarters of a century. His daughter had brought it down from the attic a week or so ago, intending to mend it and send it to the Salvation Army, but one ragged edge of the khaki wool was beyond repair, and she had put it in the closet. Not good enough to give away, too good to throw out. As Dan pulled

the scratchy cloth up around his neck, he began to sense the distinctive smell of it. There is nothing just like the smell of old wool, laundered a hundred times, nibbled and abandoned by generations of moths and mice. The smell of the blanket released a flood of memories that tumbled around him like wide-awake dreams, filling his mind not with fantasies and fairy tales, but the plain reality of what he'd experienced in the years of his life.

Of course he knew where the blanket had come from. US Army, 1917. His company of Infantry rats caught in a surprise attack, sheltered only by a French forest whose name he could never manage to pronounce, running for their lives with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the rifles they carried. No time to grab rounds of ammunition—which turned out to be lucky for them, since the enemy was sure they'd all been killed by the mortar shell that woke them up and sent them running. No time even for boots. One luckless buddy stopped to put on his boots and died before he could tie them. Dan could still feel breathless panic as he remembered running barefoot half the night, terrified and miserable, injured by half-frozen mud and blasted stubble, blessed at last with the incredible ear-ringing silence of a bombardment ended.

Soon after the winter sun rose over the French countryside, the survivors of the attack were issued new wool blankets, along with boots and ammunition to prepare them for the battle that never came. He carried the khaki wool blanket with him for the rest of the war, inhaling its new wool smell like a gift from God every night.

Home again, he joked with the girl he asked to marry him that a smelly wool blanket was all he could offer for her hope chest. It warmed their honeymoon bed, and welcomed their three babies. It even wrapped for one sad hour the lifeless body of the tiny stillborn boy born after the others.

Wool army blankets don't wear out. They never get less scratchy, ugly or smelly. They can be destroyed by a roaring fire or a battalion of especially vicious moths, but they never wear out. This one had gone camping with the family, packed along with the tent and the rest of the gear on top of the Model A. It had gone to college with his son, though not with either of his daughters. It had formed an authentic looking tent for three generations of his offspring to pitch in the wilderness of his back yard on warm summer nights. He was sure it was somewhere in the sickroom when his first wife, dear Anna, had died of

pneumonia in 1940, and was never far from sight during the decades he was married to his second wife.

All of those memories—despair and delight, love and loss—moved through Dan Simms's mind on that cold Christmas Eve. It was as if he was insubstantial and the memories vivid and concrete, as if they were real and he a ghost of years gone by. So, as the night wore on, it seemed to Dan that the remembered smells and sights of nearly a century had taken form to haunt and hallow his sleepless night.

Perhaps he fell asleep, as old men sometimes do when they think they're wide awake. Maybe part of it was dreaming, and he had lost the line between what really happened and what only seemed real. But on that Christmas Eve, sometime before the dawn of Christmas Day, one half-forgotten memory came to him so vividly that he was sure he could smell and see and hear a hundred details he hadn't thought about for half a century.

It was Christmas Eve in 1940. It had to be 1940, because he could feel so sharply the recent death of his dear young wife, his own wordless grief as hard to bear as any physical pain, made all the worse because he could see how it devastated the children. Anna had died in October. Two months of tears and anger had smoothed the raw edge of sorrow, though Dan did his best not to take it out on Bill, who was 11, or Donna and Diane, who were 6 and 7.

He had bought gifts for the children, of course, but not until Christmas Eve had he even thought about buying a Christmas tree. On the way home from work he had bought the last one standing on the vacant lot by the hardware store, and tied it to the top of the car.

As he drove into the driveway, he realized something was wrong. Not a light in the house was on, though by then it had been dark for half an hour. He was sure he hadn't given the children permission to go anywhere else.

He hurried into the house, already feeling anger and fear rising in him. As soon as he turned on the kitchen light, he could hear them in the dining room, saying "Shh" to each other. When Dan went into the dining room, his son

whispered to him, "Don't turn on the light, Daddy," and then Bill turned on an old flashlight, its batteries nearly dead, and shined its wavering light on a little scene under the dining table.

There were Diane and Donna, cradling one of their baby dolls and starting to sing, "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head..." Draped around them, and cuddled around the little baby doll, was the old army blanket. Bill kept the dim circle of light directly on them as they sang through the rest of the verse: "The stars in the sky looked down where he lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay." Bravely, their tiny voices sang all the way to the end: "Bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with thee there."

Remembering the scene more than fifty years later, Dan Simms could see clearly the mixture of sorrow and hopefulness on his children's faces, a look that assured him for the first time that there was light and joy somewhere beyond the grief of that terrible year. He could hear their brave, tiny voices filling the house for the first time in months. And as he knelt on the floor and gathered in one great, tearful hug the three most precious things in his life, he could smell that sweet, sour, slightly musty scent that had haunted half his life and might yet haunt the rest of it: the smell of the old wool army blanket.

I said at the beginning that it was Dan Simms's last Christmas Eve. But he didn't die that night. In fact, he was still proudly alone in his own house when he fell asleep on the fourth of July and didn't wake up again. So on that Christmas Day, he was able to tell his family, gathered for dinner at Donna's house, all about his sleepless Christmas Eve, and to remind them again of the bitterly sad but joyful night in 1940, when he learned what none of us should ever forget: that sometimes in the darkest sorrow, when the sky is lead and the night is bleak, a little whisper of joy, tiny and brave as the voices of children, may be there if we look and listen. Then it is for us as if the holy child of Bethlehem is born again in the darkest shadows of our heart—and we are born again to welcome him, to cradle him and all whom we love in our arms, and in whatever sorrow we experience, nonetheless to rejoice. Rejoice!

THE WORK OF THE CHURCH CONTINUES....

YES, EVEN THOUGH WE AREN'T TOGETHER THE WORK OF THE CHURCH CONTINUES. WE MIGHT NOT BE PASSING A LITERAL OFFERING PLATE BUT WE ARE PASSING A VIRTUAL ONE. YOUR GIFTS AND TITHES ARE WHAT HAVE ALLOWED THIS CHURCH TO SEE THREE DIFFERENT CENTURIES. PLEASE CONSIDER PROVIDING YOUR OFFERING THROUGH THE FOLLOWING LINK:

https://www.paypal.com/donate/?cmd=_s-xclick&hosted_button_id=MHKJLYNRGPDUS&source=url

OR FEEL FREE TO DROP IT IN THE MAIL TO **1216 CAVE ST, LA JOLLA, CA 92037**. YES, WE WILL STILL CHECK THE MAIL!

WE PREPARE TO GO OUT INTO THE WORLD

PLEASE CLICK ON THIS LINK TO ENJOY NINA'S POSTLUDE:

<https://youtu.be/Tr3rEPC90og>

MAY THE GRACE OF GOD
WHICH IS BEYOND OUR
UNDERSTANDING, THE
LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST
WHICH IS BEYOND OUR
DESERVING, AND THE
POWER OF THE HOLY
SPIRIT BE WITH EACH OF
YOU BOTH NOW
AND FOREVERMORE.

AMEN

PERFORMANCE NOTES

Bronwyn Allen-Kaeser, office manager and soprano
Nina Gilbert, music director and pianist

If you're among the 45 (!) people who joined our Christmas Eve Zoom call, we think you'll enjoy these selections again.

Prelude: *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*
Music from *Geistliche Kirchengesäng*, 1599
Arr. Mark Hayes

Solo: *A Cradle in Bethlehem*
Words and music by Al Bryan and Lawrence Stock

Postlude: *Go, Tell It on the Mountain*
Traditional Spiritual, arranged for piano duet by Lani Smith

BONUS: If you'd like to see all the music from Christmas Eve, including the hymn improvisations, in one continuous video, click this link:

<https://youtu.be/xDxzg-taU48>

If you click "show more" on the description, you'll see these direct links too:

0:00 Prelude: *Lo How a Rose*, arr. Mark Hayes

02:35 *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

04:06 *The First Nowell*

05:35 *We Three Kings*

07:11 *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*

08:45 *Silent Night*

10:22 Postlude: *Go, Tell It on the Mountain*, arr. Lani Smith

12:39 *A Cradle in Bethlehem*, by Al Bryan and Lawrence Stock