



From the Pulpit: December 24, 2022

Christmas Eve

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Luke 2:1–20

In the Meantime, IV: A Barn Shall Harbor Heaven

In a few moments, Alyssa and Ryan will sing “O Holy Night” for us with their inimitable, empyreal voices, including that line “long lay the world in sin and error pining, until he appeared, and the soul felt its worth.” That’s what I want to talk about this evening. I just want to tell you one story about that line: “long lay the world in sin and error pining, until he appeared, and the soul felt its worth.”

I’ve told you many times about my hero Gregory Boyle, a Roman Catholic priest in the Delores Mission of Los Angeles, the poorest parish in LA and home to the largest public housing project west of the Mississippi.

There are 1,100 gangs in LA County, 86,000 gang members. Thirty years ago, Father Greg started a ministry to gang members called Homeboy Industries; you’ve probably heard of it. Father Greg—the homies call him G-Dog—has buried well over 200 young people, most of them gang members.

Father Greg’s motto is “Nothing stops a bullet like a job.” He says, “If you stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop, people will tell you you’re wasting your time. But don’t quit. Stand in awe of what the poor have to carry rather than in judgement of how they carry it.”¹ Yes? Stand in awe, not judgement.

Father Greg entered the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) in 1972, 50 years ago. In an *LA Times* article celebrating his 50th anniversary, the author calls Father Greg “the patron saint of second chances.”²

That title made me admire Father Greg all the more, because we all need a patron saint of second chances. We’ve all screwed up so thoroughly, maybe multiple times, that we all need a patron saint of the second or the third or the fourth chance to help us **own** it, to **confess** it, and to **start all over again**. We all need someone to reassure us that we have not ruined everything permanently—a life, a marriage, a family, a friendship. We made a mistake; we have not written *The End*.

You can’t really describe Jesus as the patron saint of anything, so I will call him “The Lord of the Second Chance.” “Long lay the world in sin and error pining, until he appeared, and the soul felt its worth.”

Gregory Boyle was raised in family of eight—a huge LA home with two wonderful parents, five sisters, and two brothers. Greg’s mother warned the children, “Never go into the attic,” but of course that’s just what the children needed to hear to start selling tickets to the attic: “Come one, come all—The Attic.”

“Long lay the world in sin and error pining, until he appeared, and the soul felt its worth.”

¹Slightly adapted from Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart* (New York: Free Press, 2010), pp. 41–42.

²Steve Lopez, “50 Years as a Jesuit Priest on a Mission of Redemption, and the Homies Say Thanks to Father Greg,” *The Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-11-02/lopez-column-father-greg-boyle-homeboy-industries-50-years-jesuit-priest>

—Prayers of the People— The Reverend Christine V. Hides

It was a planky, gappy, precarious place and one day all eight children find an old phonograph record, made of clay. Probably most of us don't even remember the *plastic* LP discs; well, this one is even older than the plastic ones.

And so the kids grab the recording and go downstairs and haul out their children's record player, and encircle the speakers and collapse on their bellies and prop their heads up with their hands.

And they start playing this record, an old scratchy thing, but this perfect, clear, crystalline voice starts singing "O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear Savior's birth. Long lay the world in sin and error pining, until he appeared, and the soul felt its worth."

And they look at the record jacket and it says "Kathleen Conway." Kathleen Conway was their mother's maiden name. They'd never known she'd been an accomplished opera singer before she decided to have eight children. They could barely grasp the idea that the voice that bellowed at them to come to dinner belonged to this glorious music. Those eight kids played the grooves off that old record.

"Long lay the world in sin and error pining, until he appeared, and the soul felt its worth." One homie says, "Father Greg returned me to God because I had so much shame and guilt over everything that I had done. He makes me feel like I matter."³

Father Greg asks, "How is it not the job description of everybody in this room to help the soul feel its worth?"⁴ Yes? If you don't **have** a patron saint of the second chance, **be** a patron saint of the second chance. Because the one who came down to that stable in Bethlehem is The Lord of the Second Chance.

Gracious and Holy God, Light from Light Eternal, once again, we make the long, silent, journey to Bethlehem where you meet us in the humility of the messy manger, making way for the glorious impossible.

With Mary and Joseph we wonder at the gift of something newborn in our midst
on a cold winter night what is long awaited arrives.
We peer into the manger and see the good news.
Your love made tangible.
Joy for all, not just for some. Emmanuel, God with us.

With the shepherds we hear your heavenly assurance,
"Do not be afraid."
Hope arrives tenderly, in the most fragile of packages,
a newborn child wrapped in bands of cloth.
We see that even in the hardest days,
there is a way through with the divine ever-near.

And so like the magi, we follow the wild star,
expecting to find your glory revealed,
yearning to see your peace breaking into
the unexpected, forgotten corners of the world.

We come to you with gratitude,
offering to you our insufficient thanks
for the simple joys of the season: for treasured traditions,
for the company of family and friends who love us as we are,
for this community of faith to come home to,
and for this candlelit sanctuary to worship you.

Illumine the world with your mighty works.
Let your goodness be known to all who
seek a portion of your peace,
a measure of your mercy, and generous helping of healing.
Let us once again find you at the manger.
Let the quiet night quiet our urgency.
Still the bustle of last minute preparation.
Let the calm and bright of the candlelight and stars dazzle us.

Holy God, hold the burdens we carry with us.
Make way for the messy corners of our humanity.
As you did that night long ago,
let the dawn of your love break into our lives.
Let Mary's song of liberation and freedom be our prayer:
lift up the powerless and poor. Fill the hungry with good things.
Let our souls magnify you, O Lord.

O incarnate God, tonight we come weary and wondering,
hearts overflowing with what is joyful and what is tender.
Show us a vibrant multiplicity in the familiar rituals.
Transform us, enliven us,
remind us once more of the joy of this world,
the savior, the messiah, born this day.

³*Ibid.*

⁴Boyle, p. 196.