

The Fourth Sunday of Advent at St. Anne's Parish, Annapolis, December 23, 2018
The Rev'd. Timothy J. Mulder, preaching on Luke 1:39-45

As we light the final candle of Advent for this year I wonder if you might take a moment to reflect, how has this Advent brought you closer to God?

For me, it came through a simple cartoon I saw the other day. It was a variation on the theme of a Santa's list, you know: "He's making a list, checkin' it twice; gonna' find out who's naughty and nice. Santa Claus is coming to town."

Perhaps you grew up in an era when parents, often people barely out of their teens themselves and not really expert at this thing called parenting, would resort to the threat that to get what you wanted from Santa you'd better behave, you'd better be nice – especially to your little sister!

My retired bishop, Jack Spong has said that if we had earthly parents who would keep a list of things we'd done right and wrong in our growing up years and then threaten us with eternal punishment if the checks in one column outnumbered the checks in the other, Jack said no wonder we would reject that kind of parenting, even if they insisted it was love. That's not love, Jack said, that's revenge! He said he would not fault anyone who would turn their backs on a parent or a god who would treat one's children so.

Which leads me back to the cartoon, the variation on Santa's list.

Many people go through life assuming life's options are limited. There is right or wrong, black or white, one political party or the other, naughty or nice. Even our early computers took a binary view of how things can possibly work – if not this, then that.

But Advent opens us to miracles, possibilities the human mind never could imagine before. Advent takes us beyond the limits we have so often accepted. So instead of simply the two boxes in the traditional Santa's song of all our lives being judged as either naughty or nice, this cartoon had three boxes. The first said, "Naughty," but there was no check in that box. The second said, "Nice," but there wasn't a check in that one either. The third box said, "Forgiven," and there was a big check.

That, my sisters and brothers is the message of Christmas. It is not that God is keeping a list and checking it twice. Frankly, I think God would be bored silly by most of our little sins. And even the big whoppers.

I can tell you, I realized the meaning of grace when I messed up the most in my life at one point and many good folk turned their backs on me. They wanted to make sure I was punished, shunned, that I got the just deserts of my transgression – life was either naughty or nice. But I experienced unexpected grace when my strict mother bought me a shirt and a sweater and sent a note that said, "I will always love you."

My mother was like God at Christmas. To a world that continues to mess up big time; to a world that turns its back on goodness and embraces ego, pride and power and has messed up notions of what matters, God still checks the "Forgiven" box and sends us a present of love.

In Advent our souls can magnify the Lord, our spirits rejoice with Mary that God has done great things beyond the rigid boxes we so often draw for ourselves. God imagined new possibilities, new ways of living and caring. God imagined the hungry being fed and the powerful brought down from their thrones of corruption and cruelty. So use your imagination this Christmas. Imagine the boxes under the tree are not filled only with sweaters, ties and toys; perhaps there are also the boxes God adds to our lives, the ones marked: forgiven, loved, filled with joy, no need to fear. Check your boxes with the ways of God.