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Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

### Mindfulness Challenge

#### ***Mary's Perspective:***

One of these dark, dreary days, I headed into the church to set things up for the next liturgy and to play the piano. As I wandered among the pews, I was struck by the smell of Murphy's Oil Soap, and it instantly brought a flood of memories. I associate that familiar scent with my grandmother's house. When I was little, my parents would bring us over to my grandparents' house every so often to attack some of the bigger household projects as a group. I can recall blacktopping the driveway, or washing the insides of the kitchen cabinets (I got to do the lower ones because I fit inside them), or trimming the giant bushes outside of the front door. We'd work together as a family, have dinner, and then the grown-ups would play cards before leaving us (my sister and me) to sleep over. After my parents left, my grandmother always had some special treat in store for us with the instructions, "just don't tell your mother." Whether it was a midnight snack of Rootbeer floats, or getting to use a knife in the kitchen, we felt even more treasured to share these times without our parents' awareness. The Murphy's scent almost made me feel hugged.

I sat at the piano and played for more than an hour. I allowed my fingers to wander through a bunch of Advent songs, some familiar and others new to me. I sang a little (in a big empty church). As I got lost in the music, it got darker outside, until I was immersed in darkness and playing simply by the light on the music stand. The smell of the Murphy's, with the faint lingering scent of incense, in the darkness, with beautiful haunting music, made me very attuned to the changing of the liturgical season.

Later that week, I wandered into the local craft store, where I was somewhat mesmerized by the strong scent of cinnamon and whatever it is that makes craft stores smell like Christmas. I was again drawn into memories. As long as I have had children, the day after Thanksgiving has been our designated craft day. We traditionally have created ornaments (often more than 70 in a day!) that would then be distributed to our choir members and friends as a little token of gratitude. Those craft days evolved as the children grew and as their personalities began to shine through. Sometimes simple felt ornaments, other times elaborate beaded angels, that crafting time was a lot more about being together than what we actually made – and it was about creating something special so our friends would feel treasured.

Why this trip down memory lane? The whole process of remembering – of focusing on the details of smell and touch and taste and the feelings that were associated – is really an act of mindfulness. Over the years that we have been writing this blog, we have focused many times on the concept of mindfulness. I've heard it said multiple times that this year's holidays will be unlike any we have experienced before. I've also heard many people say they are willing to make sacrifices this year – to be apart from loved ones – so that we can all gather together next year.

That got me to thinking... it's quite easy to recognize the sacrifices that are called for this year. We sometimes give a thought to our police and fire and EMT and health care workers. Perhaps we even say a prayer for our front line workers



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or express gratitude when we pass a veteran in line at the grocery store. These folks take sacrifice in stride. Even fellow liturgical ministers and their families make sacrifices so that all can worship well. (My children have always waited until early afternoon on Christmas to be able to open presents; it goes with the territory.) But at least our recognizing that sacrifice is evidence of mindfulness.

Finally, we are at the precipice of another Advent season. As Christians, we are called to be messengers of hope and of light. Advent is a time of joyful expectation. In the midst of this pandemic, it would be easy to give in to the darkness. I don't know about you, but I've had a number of dumpy days lately. Perhaps it's the dreary weather, or the realization that my whole family will not be able to gather for the holidays (for the first time EVER). So how do we proclaim a message of hope? How do we see the good, particularly in this Advent?

I believe it starts with being mindful. Yes, the sacrifices and sad parts are evident. Perhaps it takes more effort to find the good. So start with the basics. Just as our liturgy has become much more basic, and our schedules are a lot less jam-packed this year, we have a unique opportunity to find joy in the moments (and maybe for once we're not so exhausted that we can actually process, enjoy, and remember the moments!). Scripture reminds us that even the disciples wanted to know how to pray. And Jesus told them to go in their room, find a quiet place, and speak to the Father. Back to the basics.

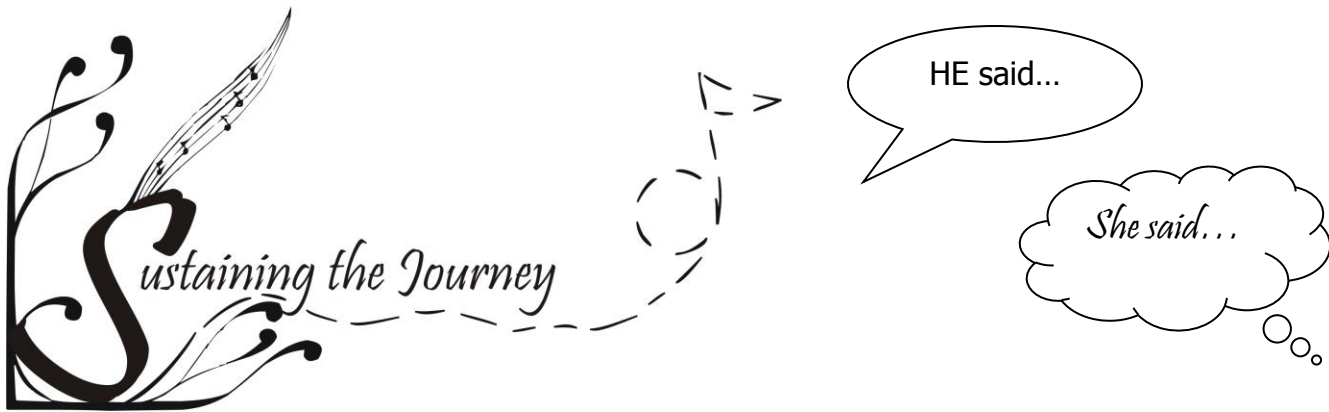
Those fragrances of Murphy's Oil Soap and incense and cinnamon brought back the richness of relatively simple experiences. As these holidays approach, we will likely find that many of our traditions and "how we've always done it" are stripped away. How will we adapt those traditions to include the important stuff, while still respecting things like stay-at-home advisories and social distancing? How will we make new memories out of this extraordinary year – memories that remind us we are a people of hope? Getting back to the basics, we are challenged to participate in these holidays with intention.

What does being mindful look like for you?

***Bob's Perspective:***

A few days ago, I celebrated the twenty-first anniversary of the beginning of my ministry at St. Monica Church. During this time, I have reflected upon how much we have been through over the years as a parish. I've thought about all of the friends I've made – those who are still with us and those who no longer grace our community with their presence – either by moving on or by passing away. My life has certainly taken many turns – leaving me (in some respects) in an uncharted territory that I would never have expected to occupy. As a parish family, we have faced many good times and have endured our share of tough times as well.

About a year after I started at St. Monica Church, the world was shaken by a terrible event. We all watched in horror on that awful day in September as thousands of lives were instantly ended. Many of us thought, "How can God let such a thing happen?" But then, in the aftermath God manifested his goodness as we saw and experienced so many examples



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of those things we have been called to do as Catholic Christians – helping, comforting and caring for each other – not just friends and family, but total strangers as well.

Every time we celebrate Advent Cycle B, I can't help but be reminded of the hope and comfort these particular scripture readings brought just a year after we had experienced the horrors of September 11, 2001. Chaos had been thrust into our lives – not unlike those who lived in the time of Jesus. The land of the descendants of Abraham was occupied by the Roman Empire. The people of the land were little more than slaves in their own country. Their religion and traditions were barely tolerated. Their only hope was that God had promised to send a Messiah, one who would deliver them – bringing justice and peace. The world, as those in the Middle East knew it at that time, was filled with religious and political strife, terrorism of sorts and war. People were looking for signs of hope and reassurance, and that's what Jesus gave to them.

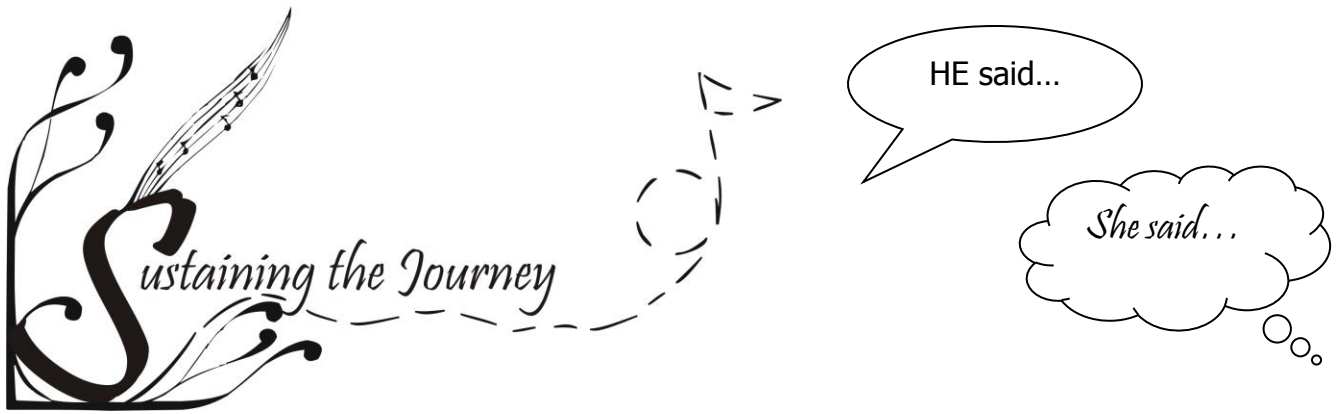
Today, the world situation is again very serious – and in some respects, hitting home in even more powerful ways than it did 19 years ago. The global fear we felt at that time has been replaced in this “Year of the Mask” by disease, death, and the tensions of day to day issues that we are all facing; violence, government dysfunction, personal economic collapse, the erosion of family values, etc.

While things won't be the same as in years past (and may never be again), we can work to accept the challenge of mindfulness as we enter into Advent. We need to keep in mind that this Advent Season (especially this cycle) focuses on hope, reassurance, and joyous anticipation. Our hope is in the Paschal Mystery – the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus – whom we worship not only in prayer, but in the way we share and experience community with each other. We need to be mindful that we are called to reflect this hope – not only in those who gather with us in Church week to week – but also in those who are unable to be with us – through invitation, encouragement and moral support. We need to be mindful of our prayer lives – keeping before ourselves the constant effort of lifting our needs and frustrations to God, who is our comfort and our strength.

These are the signs of hope to which we are called during this Advent Season: forgiving, repairing, building and embracing – as Isaiah said, “...the LORD has anointed me...to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort all who mourn...”

When Jesus came to us two thousand years ago, it wasn't in the way in which the Nation of Israel had expected. Many were waiting for the Warrior King that would lead them into battle and return freedom to the land, and many felt that their prayers for the coming of a Messiah had been unanswered. This may be a very appropriate time to express our thankfulness to a God who cares for all our needs, and answers our prayers – sometimes (or even maybe most of the time) in unexpected ways.

Advent is truly a time for building hope. What better time is there than this Advent to accept the mindful challenge of placing our needs and cares before the Lord who came to redeem us and set us free?!



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***A final thought from Mary:***

Shortly after we wrote this blog, I read a reflection from the Co-Founder of a group called *The Amazing Parish*. The point of the reflection was to address how we can evangelize, especially over the holidays. His suggestion was, when chatting with someone who may or may not be very connected to faith, ask a simple question:

*"Is there something going on in your life that I can pray for?"*

The reflection goes on to address the possible answers to this question. For example, the response may be a polite, "no, thanks," in which case it was simply a short exchange. Perhaps the answer is a bit more detailed, listing something(s) weighing heavily on that person. From there, you can take the time to truly listen, perhaps offer to pray with them, or even allow the conversation to develop into an opportunity to share something with them for which you'd sincerely appreciate their prayers. The point was that the simplest and most effective way to evangelize is to show others Jesus.

It's a lot like the blog we wrote a little over a year ago entitled, "A Few Simple Words." Whether you are seeking to change someone's life for the better by offering a few simple words – like, "How can I help?" or "I'll pray for theirs" – or whether you are using the strategy suggested in the evangelization reflection, a key point is the same: mindfulness. Offering to pray for someone rings hollow if you don't actually listen and pay attention to their need. And you can't make someone's day better if you don't take the time to walk a mile in their shoes, so that you know what actually would make a positive difference.

May we be mindful of the hope, the joy, and the light of this Advent. Perhaps that starts with praying for each other!