

Christmas 2023

Dear Family and Friends:

It was the strangest thing. Curtains at the windows of Grandpa's shed? We approached warily, wondering if someone was inside. We knocked. No one answered—but the door was open. We pushed it open and inside—well, it was not like Grandpa's shed at all. In fact, it looked like Mother Rabbit's kitchen out of one of the books of the Beatrix Potter library. There was a small dining room table all set with nice plates (with snacks!), knives, forks, and little cups for tea. Chairs the right size for 4-year-old Eliana and Caleb. A fire danced in the fireplace (well, Grandma's painting of it) and from the mantel (one of the shed's support beams) hung lavender (excuse me, rabbit tobacco). The kitchen work area was bustling with preparation. Carrots and radishes galore, dishes in the sink with the sound of running water, and the oven was on. Well, it sure sounded like it. The kitchen was just the right size! And in the shelves where Grandpa's tools used to be—were bunks where Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny were sleeping. Where did they come from? Grandpa's shed had become the little house in the woods! And Caleb and Eliana liked it very much.

A year of memories for us. Jeremy, Stephanie, Caleb, and Eliana were home on furlough and frequent visitors at the homestead. We played in the little house in the woods and in the pool nearby any number of days. Jessi and Chris, along with Tyler and Kara, hosted the clan at a reunion in Rhode Island, the first since the COVID season. A delightful time that passed far too quickly. In early November, RV's family had a reunion in Erie, Pennsylvania, celebrating the 90th birthday of a favorite uncle. Stories, pictures, memories, and laughter. Did we really look like that back then? Oh my, how things have changed! Weekends included trips to visit with Dottie's brothers.

Memories! RV could not help but mull over this a bit. Augustine reflects on the function of human memory in a couple of chapters in the *Confessions*. Memory for Augustine has not merely the recollections of past experiences, but something of an integrator of self-identity through changing perceptions and changing times. There I was in that picture so long ago, quite different in many ways and certainly in very different circumstances, but nonetheless very much me. Memory has so much to do with the maintenance of our self-concept, of our self-recognition, and of the values we carry through time.

So too with liturgical memory and the church of the Lord Jesus. When I wore a younger man's shoes, I pooh-poohed the liturgical calendar. I thought it pomp and circumstance and refused to seriously consider what I was overlooking. We should guard against pomp, but I consider the matter of the corporate memory of the body of Christ very differently now. The church's corporate memory serves to remind us of who we are in Christ and where our lives are heading through time and into eternity. Christmas reminds us vividly that Emmanuel is with us (through the whole gamut of our lives) and for us as no one else could be. Christmas points beyond the Divine Son's incarnation to Good Friday and Easter, to His humiliation for us on the Cross and His glorious triumph in the Resurrection. It continues with His Ascension, His seating at the right hand, always interceding for us, eagerly awaiting to receive His loved ones as they complete their journey. The liturgical calendar invites occasions of meaningful reflection of who we are in the Lord Jesus.

How I love the Christmas season! How I long to forge memories and traditions to cherish and build Christian identity. In this year's Yuletide celebration, may you sense anew the presence and favor of God. From our home to yours, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.