

*Whom do you seek?*

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Christ Church, Middle Haddam  
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*Jeremiah 1: 7- 8 But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a child.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord.*

We have waited, chilled and tired, through the dark night outside the stable that is Advent. We have stood watching in wonder as kings bowed before a baby. And now, in this season of the Epiphany, the manifestation of the Word made flesh, we find ourselves in deepest winter – out in the dark, in the cold, yet again.

Winter is the hard time, the season of iron-hard roads and icy ruts – both in the pathway before our feet and the roads of our souls. Winter is the time when we draw within, to save ourselves, to shelter from the freezing wind. Winter can be the time when we cease to communicate, to reach out, because it simply requires too much energy. And then, when we are alone, we are in the middle of a deep, dark night.

When times like this come into our lives, we must touch something for luck, gather up a talisman, invoke protection. We need something tangible to raise us up. When times like this come, this is what I do:

Down in the basement (because it doesn't really go with our decor) I have this painting. I go down there, days like today when it's so cold I can see my breath!, and I look at it. An old turn-

of-the-century watercolor, it was bequeathed to me by my grandmother. All her life, she kept it in her little living room, front and center. It was the first thing you saw when you entered, and the last thing you noticed when you left. It has always comforted me.

The painting shows a priest – could be anyone – in despair, praying at the back of a beautiful church, perhaps even a cathedral. The extent of the person’s despair is very evident: his head is hidden in his hands, his shoulders are slumped, he has suddenly dropped to his knees on the cold stone floor. He is just about as far away from the gorgeous blaze of the candle-filled altar as he can get. Perhaps he feels rejected, unworthy, hopeless? The figure is shrouded in darkness. Yet, from the left, a being of light emerges, reaching out a hand to comfort. The kneeling figure may not know Jesus is there, but he will begin to sense His presence. You know how we do? Have you felt that presence, behind your closed eyes? I have, and sometimes do, and it’s a marvel. Oddly, somehow, when I feel Jesus’ presence, He is always to the left of me– as in Grama’s painting.

After my grandmother died, I took this picture to a frame-shop to have the frame touched-up. When the picture in its refinished frame was returned to me, there was a small envelope taped to the back of the picture. Something had been inserted between the painting and its former backing, and when they re-framed it, they saved this small piece of paper for me. It was a communication, a message from beyond the grave. And it was a message from Our Lord, the verse we read today, Jeremiah 1:8: “I am near you and will help you,” it said in German, my grandmother’s first language. And then, in her spidery copperplate handwriting, “to Cathy from

Gramma.”

Someone standing, just there, to my left, out of sight. Yet I feel Him. He warms me. In the darkest night of the deepest winter, when even the warmest hearts can feel chilled to the bone, when so many of us realize the awful extent of our emotional isolation in the midst of this careless and neglectful world, Christ stands with us.

The poet Rilke says it this way:

Whom should I turn to,  
if not the one whose darkness  
is darker than night, the only one  
who keeps vigil with no candle,  
and is not afraid –

The deep one, whose being I trust.\*

Whom do you seek in this cold, dark night? He is already with you. He is near you, and will help you.

\*Rainer Maria Rilke, *Book of Hours*, “I’m still the one who knelt before you.”