

Ordinary time
November 2021
Dear Friends,

Magnificat



And so Joseph went from the town of Nazareth to David town of Bethlehem

I braced myself coming down to Birmingham - expect the unexpected! I imagined all forms of chaos. I'd been reading Scott Schaeffer-Duffy's *Nothing is Impossible*, Shelley's Mary's House essays, Rosalie Riegle's *Voices from the Catholic Worker*, and all the great 1930s NYC stuff. I was totally ready to drive someone to the ER in the night, or to see if I could swing a nonviolent fight break-up. I imagined running down the corridor like I did on the psych floor at St Mary's Hospital. Naturally, I was sent the opposite.

Two months of time to read and write, time for morning prayer, time to find a running route, to learn Spanish, to introduce myself to the neighbors, learn the shelter system, to kayak (thanks Terri!), give talks, find out who's helping refugees in Birmingham, send lot and lots of letters and postcards, to vigil, pick up donations around the city, to continue the work I'd been doing with friends in Afghanistan, learn how to do assessments, to peruse the Goodwill every week for clothes for the homeless, to befriend librarians (one of whom walked me out of the library to her car, where she gave me bags of diapers and toiletries). My days have been full. And I am thankful. I've tried to stop guessing the future (impossible). Zora Neale Hurston - "She knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up."

Shelley, the indefatigable social worker Jeff, and I have had a trickle of potential guests. We decided to continue hosting women and children - you'd think there would be plenty of women and children to welcome, but one thing or another comes up. Many prefer not to get vaccinated - and we require vaccinations since we often host people with serious medical conditions. Many, many women are trying to escape domestic violence, and we cannot host them as we cannot keep them safe. We refer many to emergency shelters, but, as I found in Chicago, they are always full. You have to be on top of it to get admitted to a shelter! As a hardened night owl, the idea of calling first thing every morning to see if there's a space and then hightailing it there without a vehicle and with a shoddy public transportation system is a bit much. And you can't work when you're living in a shelter - the schedule forbids it. We have also had calls from people in terrible situations whom we have been unable to host. A grandmother caring for her three disabled children and her eight grandchildren whose house had recently been condemned as unlivable - as Shelley said, some people live impossible lives. The city - every city - is filled with people living impossible lives. It is a blessing of sorts to be able to see this. We can start there at least.

Our first guest came, and.... gone! A young woman who moved her things in, then said she got a job and never really came back. At Mary's House it is important to swing by now and then! So we asked her to leave. Our second guest was also unexpected. A developmentally disabled woman trying to escape a dangerous cycle of domestic violence - she'd been hospitalized twice over the summer. Well it took one week, three people on the job, a hotel voucher, and one last minute night's stay at

Mary's House to get her to a safe place. I don't know how people do it. Often, they can't. Two months ago I thought of cause and effect differently. I thought, extend your hand, and someone will grab it. Now I think, keep your hand extended and someone will jump up from behind. The point is to make yourself available - but you won't be available in the ways you thought you'd be. Thankfully!

I'm excited to tell you about our big news (well, all of it is big news!). Next week we'll be hosting Afghan refugees. Inspiritus, a wonderful organization that works with refugees, is helping humanitarian parolees who have been kept on military bases settle in Birmingham, and Mary's House will be providing transitional housing. We don't know how much English anyone will speak, and we don't know whether we'll be hosting single men or families. I have stopped trying to guess anything, in fact, besides what is necessary for making Mary's House as welcoming as possible. Next week the house will look entirely different, and that is welcome. Change is good.

Please pray for us and keep praying for us. We also will be praying for you, our friends. Keep in touch! Letters and emails are relished - I tend to run to the mailbox every evening. When I moved in a couple of family members asked if they could send a housewarming present. It took me a couple weeks, but I realized the house could use two muses - James Baldwin and Billie Holiday. Now their pictures are proudly hanging. I don't want to put words in the mouths of either, but insofar as the world will be saved by beauty, they, two people on whom the suffering of the twentieth century fell heavily, are saving it. We hope we can summon a little of their spirit.



Our chief hospitaller waiting to welcome guests

Sarah



We're looking forward to an in-person retreat!! Health and travel regulations allowing, we are planning our spring retreat:

A RETREAT WITH ALAN STOREY

7pm Friday April 29 – noon Sunday May 1, 2022

Alan Storey is pastor of Central Methodist Mission in Cape Town, South Africa. He is ordained in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. Alan did his theological training at Rhodes University, where he helped found Gun Free South Africa. He was the last conscientious objector to military *service under the apartheid regime, and is a strong voice for peace and justice. Alan melds meticulous*



scripture scholarship with trenchant observation of world events. We look forward to his second retreat with us, reflecting on what it means to live the Gospel in the world as we'll know it in late spring of 2022.

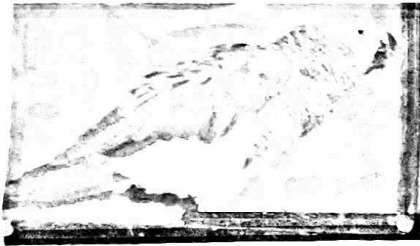
NEW VENUE: our old faithful the Rush Center is no longer available, so we will be meeting at Eastlake United Methodist Church, 7753 1st Avenue S, Birmingham AL 35206. Check our next newsletters for more information – we're still working this out! But do mark your calendar. Alan is not to be missed!

To register, write or phone Mary's House, 2107 Ave G, Birmingham AL 35218, 205 780 2020, or email shelleymdouglass@gmail.com.

Waiting To Be Released

Yesterday I pulled carrots from my bucket garden in the side yard. They look good – various colors of carrot, small but hopefully tasty. They're the best harvest I've had this year. For the last two years I've planted my bucket garden the way I planted at Mary's House, and of course the results haven't been the same. Mary's House has plenty of sun in the back yard, while my Little House by the tracks is shaded by tall trees which we keep to help cool the house. Habit encounters reality.

Habit. We've just "fallen back" time-wise, and all our interior clocks are off. Lady is used to a walk with Jim between 5 and 6 pm, followed by dinner. Her habit is to sit expectantly by the front door beginning at around 4. With the time change her wait begins at 3. Her interior clock isn't wrong, but the exterior clocks



have changed, and Jim is going by the exterior ones. Similarly, we've been going on our morning walks a bit later because it's chilly now. Justice the African Grey is used to a day that starts at 7 am, when we come back from our walk. These days our early mornings are punctuated by a plaintive "hello" every few minutes

(from his covered cage), in case we've forgotten him.

All this makes me wonder about some of my own habits, especially habits of mind. These days approaching Advent contain first the difficult readings about lifestyle for Jesus' followers, and then readings about the end, the unexpected rather intimidating end. Both challenge me to look at my own life, my own habits, and I find myself far afield from that road I'm supposed to be on.

The events of the last years have uncovered the rotten roots of the US empire – the disregard for life, the racism, the exploitation of peoples and the planet. The growth of transnational capitalism has spread and intensified these plagues. (Did you know that the major oil companies have known since the 1980s about climate change and fossil fuels, even as they spread denial and refused reform?)

Reading the news these days has been for the most part a depressing experience. Events that I find hopeful, like last year's huge Black Lives Matter demonstrations, are covered with ominous twists, and hopeful events like the Water Protector's struggle, or the Four Necessity Valveturners, or the recent weeks of action in DC on climate change – aren't covered at all.

I can change my news gathering habits. I can choose what I read, and be sure to read alternate and positive news about people taking positive action. That's not hard.

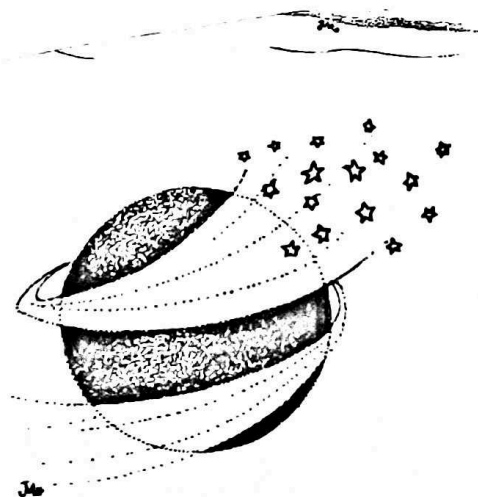
What concerns me most in this year-end examination coming up to Advent is the effect it's had on my orientation to my world. It's harder than it has ever been to find and believe in positive actions. It's harder to see the image of God in people. The virus of distrust and disappointment has no known vaccine, and that's the virus that I see spreading, beginning with me. Since it's a spiritual virus, it's easier to spread and harder to counter.

When people ask Jim what Dorothy Day was like, he'll often say that she was so struck by the glory of each human being that she inspired them to be more than they'd known they could be. "Isn't she (or he) a wonder!" she'd say, and they had a much better chance of becoming "wonders" than before. Dorothy certainly could be severely critical of people, especially of her friends, but she had that basic insight, that each of us is a wonder waiting to be released.

Albert Raboteau (in *American Prophets*, Princeton, 2016) quotes Abraham Joshua Heschel on the teachings of Hasidism: "we are called to see the holy sparks within all created beings...and to bring together the sparks to preserve single moments of radiance and keep them alive in our lives, to defy absurdity and despair and to wait for God to say again: Let there be light. And there will be light." Given our current situation, we don't know if humanity will survive. We don't know if the world will survive. We don't even know if there will be light. But we do have that choice, Dorothy's choice, to see the wonder rather than the faults in each person. We have that Hasidic invitation, to see the holy sparks and bring them together to make defiant lights, to defy absurdity and despair.

My Advent discipline: Break the habit of despair; find the holy sparks and keep them alive.

Shelley D.



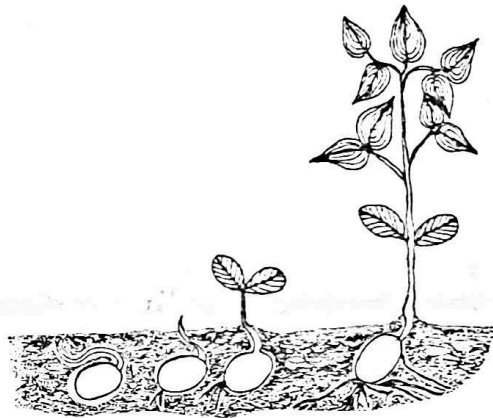
Catholic Worker Roots

Here at Mary's House we're expecting to house refugees for the first time, people fleeing Afghanistan.

"You shall treat the alien who resides among you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself, for you too were aliens in the land of Egypt." (Lev.19:5)

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. (Hebrews 13:2)

And we remember Matthew 25: "What you have done to the least of these, you have done to me."



THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU

Mary's House has depended on you, our friends, since the very beginning. Over the last few years you may have wondered (as we did) if Mary's House would continue. We are so grateful to you for sticking with us! Without your continuing support we would have had to close our doors. Thanks to you we were able to offer very modest hospitality at the house, pay for motel rooms, help people with other expenses, and generally keep things going while we waited for a new hospittaller. We hope that you're as happy as we are that Sarah has arrived, and that you'll continue to support us as we open the house again.

You'll see from this newsletter that we are easing back into a more "normal" life, taking guests and hoping for a late spring in-person retreat. Thank you for helping us to reach this point, and please keep us in prayer as we move forward.

Mary's House Needs

First, as always, we need your prayers. Please pray that we will be "wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" and for past present and future guests.

Now that we'll be hosting Afghan refugees it is a little difficult to predict what we might need - but what is always needed are toiletries, laundry detergent, cleaning supplies, toilet paper, and toddler and baby items.

Hotel vouchers are much appreciated. We never know whom we would love to host but for whatever reason, cannot. If you'd like to help with this, please send a check or money order with 'hotel voucher' in the notes, and we will make sure it is used for this purpose.

If anyone speaks Pashto or Dari (especially in the Birmingham area!) we would love to hear from you. We may have to use a lot of Google translate with our new guests, and we know that sharing a language is one of the greatest comforts to those in exile.

To contact us about donations, volunteering, or anything else, even to say hi! please call us at 205-780-2020, or email at Sarah.Ball7@gmail.com.



Events



- We are still postponing our First Friday Masses. But we are SO excited for them to start up again and we hope you are too. Stay tuned!

- Please join us for a **vigil for peace** every Wednesday at 7:30 AM and Saturday at 5 pm by the fountain at 5 Points South. "People think there must be some magical tactic, beyond the traditional ones - protests, demonstrations, vigils, civil disobedience - but there is no magical panacea, only persistence." - Howard Zinn

- We are very excited to announce our **Easter retreat** with Alan Storey - in person in Birmingham 2022! 7 pm Friday April 29 to noon on Sunday May 1. We hope you all will try to come. **Not To Be Missed!** - as those of you who caught Allan Storey the first time know.

-**Death Penalty Vigil:** We have no executions scheduled now, but should the state set an execution date we will vigil from 11:30 am to 1 pm at the Art Museum and County Courthouse, Arrington & Woods North.



JOIN US FOR THESE EVENTS~

We are still not comfortable having Masses in our small living room, but we hope that by spring that may be possible. However, join us for these events:

PEACE VIGILS at Five Points South at the Fountain – Wednesdays, 7:30-8:30 am and Saturdays 5- 6 pm. We have signs, or bring your own.

DEATH PENALTY VIGILS : we don't have a scheduled execution now, but if one is scheduled, we'll vigil on the day from 11:30 am to 1 pm in front of the art museum and the County Courthouse at Arrington & Woods N. We have signs. If the execution is carried out we have a short requiem prayer vigil by the Dr. King statue in Kelly Ingram Park at 5:55 pm. (Alabama kills people at 6 pm.)

AND IN THE SPRING: we're hoping to have our spring retreat in person. We've invited Alan Storey, pastor of Central Methodist Mission in Cape Town, South Africa, to be our leader. We'll have more information in the next newsletter, but *mark your calendars* : April 29th – May 1st. More information inside.

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