

Christmas 2004 and Epiphany 2005

The weather has turned very cold and we keep the fire in the wood stove going all day. When I get up during the night, I find a few coals still glowing in the dark stove. I rake them together, put in fresh logs and a bit of newspaper that bursts satisfyingly into flame. This extra chore in the night gives us the unaccustomed luxury of a warm front room in the early morning.

The dog (hereafter known as Athe dog \cong) is fifteen and sleeps a lot, mostly on his bed in what used to be the boys= room, but increasingly in front of the fire. He is deaf, from the whistles of too many passing trains. We live next to the tracks a block from the crossing, and the engineer starts his cadence next to our house. I put my hands over my ears or get inside, but Lassen was not able to do that. The whistle used to set him howling, and when the boys were home, and he did that during evening prayer, they set up howling too, and there was a short break until we settled back down to Gregorian chant.

I told a neighbor=s boy that I was the one who told the engineer when to blow his whistle. The boy was very impressed, and his father had to explain to him that it was not true. When I do not hear the train coming, and the whistle blows unexpectedly, it reminds me of the trumpet at the Last Day. It makes me wonder whether, if it were the end of the world, I would be ready, and it is a reminder of my mortality. It is especially appropriate to think about solemn things like this during Advent.

The dog wanders around the house sometimes, as if he were looking for something. I think his experience of old age is strange for him, and he wants some reassurance. Mom and Dad are not there yet, but Dad has officially entered into The Last Age of His Life, that is to say he retired. Now in December, last May when I was still teaching at Lassen Community College, in the familiar patterns of twenty years -- I=m trying to avoid saying Aon auto-pilot \cong -- seems a long time ago. I hardly ever go to Susanville and do not miss the daily commute. I get a senior discount too, such as for the Messiah where I started writing this letter, while I was waiting for the performance. At our favorite health food store in Chico, I asked the clerk for the senior discount. I told her I could not find the youth tonic, and I was still 63.

2004 was a very big year. It started with our first train wreck, when thirteen freight cars derailed up and down the track outside our house in January. Within minutes there were four red fire trucks parked in front of our house. I am putting in their picture, because it looks Christmasy.

Elijah married Rebecca Halpin in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on August 6, with Deacon Avram witnessing their vows. It was fun to see Aryae=s family and Mom=s relatives, and to meet Becky=s parents. A side benefit of visiting Maine was that Mom and I got to see the historic spot where Avram and Elijah dipped their bicycle wheels into the Atlantic Ocean in August 2001, at the end of their ride from Oregon.

A week later on August 14, back home in California, Avram was ordained to the priesthood of the Catholic Church. The big church in Susanville was full. Avram=s friends sang some very splendid music, and a boy from Clear Creek played his trumpet. At the reception Father Avram gave individual blessings to long lines of people. Fortunately the kitchen crew saved him a plate of food, because he did not have a chance to eat until everyone had gone, and they were cleaning up. I took a picture. The party in the evening was a like a Gibbs family reunion, plus my brother and lots of Avram=s friends.

Now that all of my sons have made their life commitments, I feel like Simeon in the Christmas story (Luke 2:25-35). My work is done, and I can die happy.

Mike and Camille Klimek camped in our driveway from August to November, while they looked for a house to buy. They were very easy to have around. Camille is a good cook, and it was fun when we shared meals.

Mom paints icons and volunteers once a week at the crisis pregnancy center in Susanville. She goes to stay with Grandma Diane when Camie and Sherman want to go away for a few days. Since Grandma Diane gave up driving, Mom gets to visit with her, when she takes her where she wants to go.

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