

[GIRL] Her name was Jakelin Amei Rosmery Caal Maquin. She was one of many people fleeing from starvation in her home country of Guatemala. Severe droughts had killed their food crops. Coffee crops that they rely on for cash had been hit by a fungus, so there was little money to buy food. Violence and crime were everywhere. Fleeing from a life worse than death was their only hope.

When she arrived at the border station in New Mexico, she was apparently healthy. The border station had problems with safe water; its workers wouldn't drink it, or wash their hands or clothes in it. Within hours, she had a fever of over 105, and was no longer breathing. It was too late. A seven year old girl died, hungry, poor, sick, in detention, apparently because she lacked one simple thing, that we take for granted.

[POUR] This. Would you pray with me, please. [PRAYER]

[BLANK] In our new Christian year, this season of Advent, we are here to open the gifts of faith, as we prepare for the coming of a child named Jesus; our Christ; our savior; our God. [MIRROR] We are here to reflect on how much we see the image of God in ourselves, and in God's world. [CLOTH] We are here to refresh ourselves, in spirit and in flesh, so that we can re-flesh ourselves, and claim ourselves as children of God, connected to all children of God, in spirit and in flesh, who need the salvation of God.

[BLANK] And as we use these tools of Christian discipleship to open our gifts of faith, gifts that connect us to God's plan for salvation in Jesus, we may begin to realize something powerful, and important: God's offer of salvation in Jesus isn't just for us. It's for everyone, everything, everywhere. Even, and, perhaps, especially, a little girl who walked a thousand miles in search of salvation. Jesus is coming to save her, too.

[GIFT] Maybe this is why people don't want to seek out faith so often these days. Maybe, deep inside our souls, or not even that deep, we know that opening the gifts of faith opens a can of worms that we don't really want to take off the shelf. We have excuses, rationales, traditions, comfort zones, and, often, many friends and family members, who can give us any number of excuses why we should not open our gifts of faith. And so, we reflect just enough to see what we want to see, and no more. We refresh, but just enough so that we feel recharged for a few days. Because, after all, if we looked any further, if we looked around at the flesh that needs God's salvation as much as we do, it would mean taking responsibility for what the gifts of faith give us: a sense of belonging.

[BLANK] We belong to God. We belong to each other. We are one nation, under God, but we are just one of all nations, under the God who wants to claim us all as children of God. So accepting God's "we," as people who really believe in Jesus Christ, takes our blinders off, so that we can never again un-see God's "we"-ness. "We," for Christians, opens the gifts of faith, and gives the box away to someone who doesn't have anything to put in a box; "we," for Christians, strips away our illusions of terminal uniqueness, our vain dreams of being a superstar of some kind, our false stories of moral superiority, just because of where we happened to have been born, and to whom we were born; "we," for Christians, accepts that we celebrate the reason for the season, Jesus, as a humble, poor child, coming to a manger, a place where animals eat, because we, like any

humble person, need to be restored to the life of Jesus. As God's children, who belong in God's "we," we need the reason for the reason for the season: salvation from certain destruction, through faith in Jesus Christ.

For some people, the word "salvation" has lost all meaning. For some, perhaps it's a code word for "you're in God's club, now." For others, perhaps it's something that "those other people" need. But for the prophet Isaiah, who called out to the lost people of Israel, trust in God's offer of salvation was strong enough to protect a whole nation like a shield, satisfying enough to quench the thirst of a nation broken by destruction and slavery, like the most satisfying drink of water imaginable. [FOUNTAIN] Isaiah spoke for God, and said: "You will draw water with joy from the springs of salvation. And you will say on that day: 'Thank the Lord; call on God's name; proclaim God's deeds among the peoples; declare that God's name is exalted.'" Salvation is being able to drink from God's fountains of hope, and love, and joy, and peace, born of Jesus, no matter how hot and dry this world gets.

What do we need restored to us through God's salvation in Jesus? [LIST] What do we need to shop for spiritually that can help us to really open up the gifts of faith in Jesus Christ in this new year? I will share my own shopping list with you in a few minutes, but for now, you might want an eraser on your pencil as you put together your list. After all, faith helps us to see that what we need to have restored to us are things that we don't buy or sell. Things that we can buy or sell can help us, our church, and others, in very real ways, just like the little girl Jakelin desperately needed some real help to live, and not just prayers. Our shopping list for faith will go deeper, and wider, so that we can restore our belonging to the "we" that makes her drink of water our second nature. [BLANK]

John the Baptist, in our reading from Luke's gospel, starts our shopping list to re-store our Christian faith. John the Baptist had seen the effects of Israel's failure to open the gifts of faith: a moral, spiritual, and social failure that had produced hypocrisy, oppression, and arrogance among his people. When people came to John to repent for their failures, they asked John what to do to open the gifts of faith. He said, "Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father."

Being in "God's club" is not enough. We aren't born into God's family; we are reborn into it, to belong to Jesus. To everyone, John the Baptist said, share the basics of human dignity with everyone: food, and clothing, and, yes, water, should be given to others like our own children, because they are God's children, and so are we. The corrupt, the brutal, and the greedy must treat people fairly. Baptism is just the beginning of being the "we" of God. Walking the talk of God is our salvation. Failing to walk the talk is not belonging, a failure of God's "we."

John the Baptist saw what we need to see: that preparing for the coming of Jesus in our hearts was not just a matter of setting our alarm clock for midnight on Christmas day. Jesus is coming. Jesus is coming! Jesus! The God of heaven and earth is coming to us, coming as us, to be with us, and for us, and for everyone. Jesus, the one who

came to us to die for us, and for everyone, is coming. Jesus, the one who now sits on the throne of God's universal love, and judges heaven and earth, is coming. What will we have in store for Jesus when he comes? What do we need to restore to our lives, and to God's world, so that Jesus will rejoice in us as children of God? This is what John the Baptist asks us to consider. Are we preparing the way of the Lord, the Lord who can save us all?

Our shopping list for restoring the gifts of faith will grow, and change, as we become more like children of God, and prepare for the joyful coming of Jesus into our lives. The full armor of God, which we learned about in our summer sermon series, will certainly be an important item on our list. But most of God's gifts of faith will come with a little label attached to it, a label familiar to parents getting ready for Christmas day: [SIGN] "Some assembly required." Restoring the gifts of faith requires us to work with the ingredients of faith on our list, as we try new ways to put things together in faith. Restoring the gifts of faith will always reach a point when we realize that we need others to help us understand how to rise from our failures, and try again, reaching for new tools, new ingredients, again and again, learning all along the way. [BLANK]

Through faith in Jesus Christ, we belong to God. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we belong to God's world. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we belong to God's plan for the salvation of all of Creation. We can re-store what we need to open the gifts of faith, so that we can help God, in ways small and large, to have this earth, preparing for the Christ child, look more like Eden, flowing with pure and sweet waters of faith, filled with the fruits of faith, a joyful way of life in which we can rejoice, forever. Reflect. Refresh. Restore. And, when we celebrate the coming of the Christ child, Jesus, rejoice, in belonging to God's story, a story being born again, and again, forever. Amen.