Blog

Spirituality



The Collier campus after the first major snow, leading to the school's first snow day of the year. Students and staff love seeing the campus covered in white like a winter wonderland. (Maddie Thompson)



by Maddie Thompson

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Editor's note: *Notes from the Field includes reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. A partnership with Catholic Volunteer Network, the project began in the summer of 2015.*

Despite the recognition and experience of deep suffering, I truly believe we are a people of hope. Looking back on different seasons of life, I do not know if I could always make that statement so firmly.

I think back to my experiences living and learning abroad in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The stories individuals so bravely shared there were often of sadness and separation because of the international conflict. I do not take lightly sitting in that sacred space of listening to another's story of pain. Through service-learning immersions, books on racial justice, and conversations with strangers who became friends, I continue to see signs of suffering and brokenness: the effects of climate change, inequality, racism, poverty and more.

I am acutely aware of how we have broken our world by not caring about the footprints we leave, by marginalizing communities who do not look or sound like those in power, by valuing products over people; the list goes on. Serving in a space like Collier High School renews my sense of hope even when a piece of my heart constantly feels weighed down by the recognition of the world's pain. In some almost magical way, Collier can hold the pain and suffering of the world in tension with the reality that we always have reason to hope.



Collier High School's lobby is decorated to celebrate the holidays. Staff members go out of their way to celebrate the students' different traditions, and a festive lobby is one way they make this happen. (Maddie Thompson)

Students and staff can imagine or have experienced many of the battles their peers have struggled through to show up at school each day. Yet they simultaneously know the joys of overcoming obstacles, making it to graduation, landing a job, managing mental illnesses, getting discharged from the hospital, finding a secure home placement, and more.

The Collier community accompanies and hopes alongside one another. Whether it is hoping for chocolate chip cookies as the cafeteria dessert, for a familiar face to greet you once you step off the bus, or for the first snow day, Collier encourages students and staff members to hope in big and small ways.

There is nothing like hoping for the first snow day of the year. You can feel a change in the atmosphere — eyes glued to the windows, the informal polls in every class asking what you would do with a snow day, teachers reminding students to bring all

their materials home "just in case."

Talking with students about their Hanukkah, building snow people, or watching holiday movies reminds me that even in a year of chaos and catastrophe, we can be resilient.

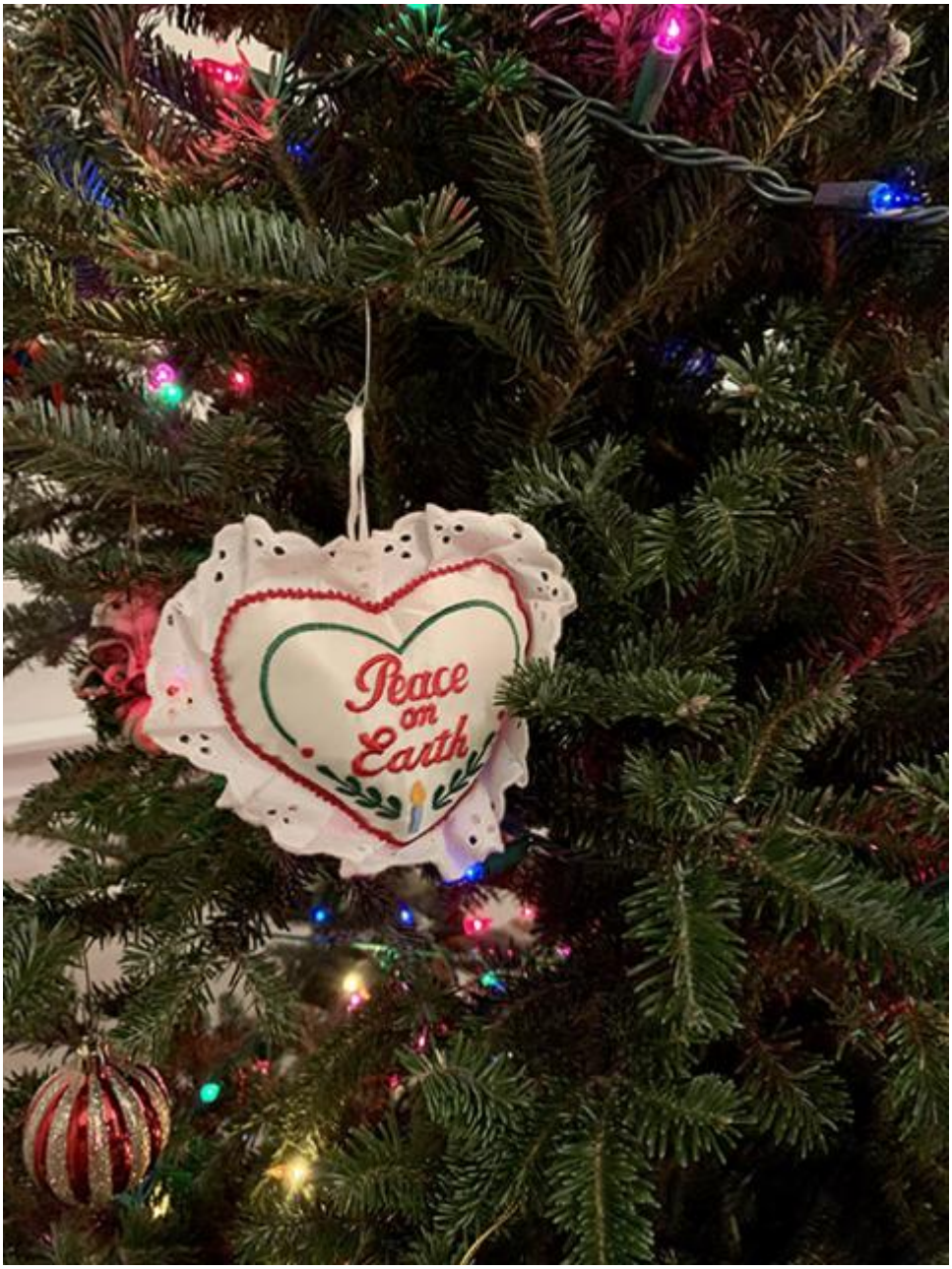
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I heard a beautiful reflection on the first Sunday of Advent about entering this season of waiting. The speaker acknowledged how Advent felt especially difficult to enter into because this entire year has been filled with waiting: waiting for information about COVID-19; waiting for news that our family and friends are healthy; waiting for a vaccine; waiting to hug our loved ones; waiting to share our smiles. The waiting of Advent nestled within this year of waiting feels like being asked to munch on ice while you're standing in a snowstorm.

That first Advent week of hope particularly struck me this year. How deeply I hope for a world that is safe and healthy for all. How deeply I hope for a world without violence and injustice. How deeply I hope for a world that sees the value in every unique person.

At Collier, hope springs up around every corner this season in the coziness of ugly Christmas sweaters, gifts for students, the staff laughing behind the scenes of the Christmas film, holiday treats, traditions adjusted for the pandemic, holiday movies, crafting and decorating, lights that bring warmth, activities on half-days and celebrating all traditions' sacred days.

I know that seeing hope so easily isn't the case around the world. I recognize that hope can sometimes seem unfathomable. Yet I am incredibly grateful that spaces like Collier exist, spaces that overflow with hope. I can only wish that the hope of Collier continues to spread to each corner and crevice of the world through our students and staff.



At the Sisters of the Good Shepherd's convent in Wickatunk, New Jersey, which I helped decorate for Christmas (Maddie Thompson)

The other night, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd invited me to help decorate their convent on the Collier campus for Christmas. As I opened boxes and unwrapped Nativity figurines with the sisters, I immediately felt connected with my community around the world. I was transported to my home in St. Louis, hanging ornaments on the tree and finding spots for my mom's collection of Santa figurines around the house.

Next, I thought of the olive woodworkers of Bethlehem, carving Nativity scenes that showed the reality of the land: a separation wall situated in the middle of the sacred scene. Finally, I reflected on my experiences in college with individuals I came to grow alongside as we built new traditions while struggling through finals and exams.

I wondered how people near and far are keeping hope alive this holiday season. How in your tradition — whether secular, spiritual or religious — are you choosing to hope in a year like no other?

The anticipation and hope for a vaccine, for a sense of normal, for walking through school without a mask, can at times feel overwhelming. Yet it is the small things staff and students do for one another here at Collier that remind us that seasons of waiting are still seasons that will eventually come to an end.

We hope for a warm and memorable holiday season. We hope for a healthy and bright new year. We hope for peace to spread near and far. And we hope for a world filled with people who continue to choose hope so that in the darker days, we can catch a glimpse of their light.

[Maddie Thompson is a Good Shepherd Volunteer serving at Collier High School in New Jersey.]

This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** feature series. View the full series.