



Peace December 2018

***“No matter who, no matter what, no matter how... you pray.
Let’s say a prayer, this season, together, for peace.”***

Mattie J.T. Stepanek

A message from Jeni Stepanek, PhD (“Mattie’s mom”)

Throughout his life, Mattie would create and share new poetry or prayers to celebrate December and the Christmas holidays. He loved that the winter holidays were all about *love* and *light* during such a cold and dark time of the year. And he loved that Christmas celebrated the birth of the Savior baby, who became a teacher and messenger of *hope* and *peace* and *purpose* for *all* people – some of Mattie’s favorite truths.

When he was 2½ years old, Mattie’s first December “prayer-poem” was very brief. He simply asked God to bless his three siblings (who by then were all deceased), and to bless the Christmas tree (which to toddler Mattie, was a tangible expression of all the things that made Christmas so special, and also a festive celebration of tradition for individuals and families and communities).

At ages 3 through 5, he wrote about the specialness of “Christmas Stars” – which he said are gifts to people who “remember to look up,” and about the North Pole being wonderfully-close to Heaven – where his siblings lived. But he also wrote about the struggle to find holiday peace inside of his heart and mind and spirit as he tried to celebrate life while also dealing with the loss of his siblings and a young childhood friend.

As he continued to grow older, and more aware of the needs of global neighbors and a lack of peace in our world, Mattie’s end-of-year offerings moved more and more towards a celebration of humanity, and a call for global unity – including collective voices joined in prayers for peace across diverse faiths. He was excited to print and illustrate copies of these expressions each year, and give them out to parishioners in our church, and to friends in our community, and to complete strangers that he embraced as *neighbors* – because they had *connected* in stores or on street corners. Mattie wanted to “give Jesus the gift of a birthday smile” by loving each neighbor – whether known or new to him.

Throughout his childhood, poetry and prayers typically flowed from Mattie in an ever-ready and steady stream of words. Sometimes, he said God was the source of a creative expression, and that he was “the messenger” who shaped the poem or prayer with words for people and our world, so that God’s presence and purpose could be known and understood. And sometimes, he was humbly proud to share an expression that he said was a gift of purpose from his own thoughts and understandings. When he turned 13 years old during July of 2003 though, for the first time ever, Mattie began struggling to put poetry and prayers onto paper, or even into spoken words. He was still enjoying video games and chatting with friends and playing with his dog – typical activities for many new teenagers, but Mattie’s heart and mind and spirit were weighted with what he said was a realization that his time on earth was coming to a final transition. He told me that he knew God was proud of all he had done to live with purpose, but that there were no new messages to share, and that God was now a silent presence in his life.

By the time December and the Christmas holidays were approaching, Mattie came to me – with sadness and frustration. “I’m 13, Mom. I’m a teenager, but still a kid,” he said. “Christmas is about embracing the truths of hope and peace. It’s about enjoying moments and others, with gifts and celebrations in the *here* and *now*. But for me, Christmas this year is about embracing the truths of *eternal* hope and peace. Those are the ultimate truths and gifts, but it is so hard to know that I will be leaving all of this. Even with pain, I love the here and now. I love living.”

As a mom, I wanted to promise my son that he was wrong. I wanted to reassure him that he would have many more years to trim the tree and to wrap and unwrap gifts and to create Christmas poetry and memories. But all I could do was hold him, and pray – for hope, and for peace.

Mattie also coped with this season of mixed feelings through prayer, and by relying on traditional activities, saying that the combination of the two helped him connect *what was* and *is* with the whatever of *what next* – and to do so with the gifts of purpose and choice. Instead of creating a new Christmas poem that year, he reflected on his expressions from previous years and re-shaped messages that he knew were rooted in hope and peace and purpose, saying that the messages he shared – whether from God, or from his own heart and mind and spirit – were timeless and universal truths. And, instead of *me* reassuring my child that things would be okay, it was *him* reassuring me. He told me that he was not “resigned” to God’s plan for him, but “accepting” of it, saying, “even the silence of God gives me strength, which gives me courage to accept the knowledge and understanding I have been offered.” He said that the prayers and traditions of the season reminded him that peace *is* possible – for our world, and also for every heart and mind and spirit if we choose to live with faith, and seek our Heavenly gifts.

Mattie reminds us, and reassures us, that God, the Prince of Peace, is with us – in silence and songs, and poetry and prayers, with purpose and strength. Peace *is* possible during celebrations and sufferings – peace within, peace with others, peace with our world, and peace with God. Let us remember this as we trim our trees and wrap and unwrap gifts this season. *Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel* – God with us.

Let us pray: Dear God, Please strengthen our hearts and minds and spirits with Your gifts of presence and purpose during this season of waiting and love and hope and light, as we prepare for celebrations with prayer and traditions. During times abundant with blessings, and times weighted with burdens, help us remember that *You are* near, so, peace *is* possible, for us, and from us. **Amen.**
