

“Hope Bandits”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church
12-24-20 Christmas Eve Story

Mrs. Peabody stared out at the twenty-four pairs of tired eyes that stared back at her from her screen. “Now that the term is almost over,” she said, “I’m sure you must be wondering about your final exam. I have decided this year that it makes little sense, given our virtual format and everything that is going on in the world, for me to give you a written exam to take at home. After spending the semester studying human development, and all that makes us healthy human beings, I don’t want you just to regurgitate back to me book knowledge. I want you to be the best human beings you can be by showing me creatively what you have learned. Think about what we have talked about this year so far– our human need for connectedness and how the pandemic has interfered with that, what makes us feel anxious, depressed, and hopeless, and what makes us resilient, confident, healthy, and happy. Think about how you, yourselves, have felt over these past few months. Then, with the teammates I will assign to you in a moment, I want you to show me what you have learned. You can do so by creating something– a painting, sculpture, song, or short story for example–, or by doing an experiment or project on one of the topics we have studied. Whatever you do, I want to see that you have thought through what we have discussed enough to convey it in a way that others can appreciate. You have over Christmas break to do your work.”

After being assigned to a group together, Steve, Gretchen, Diego, Michael, and Shanice gathered together in the chat room to discuss what they would do.

“Well, I can tell you one thing,” Michael said, “I don’t want to write anything. I’m sick of sitting in front of a computer. I want to do something.”

“Well, we could interview people who have been anxious or depressed,” Shanice suggested.

“That’s like, practically everyone,” Diego responded.

“Ugh. Can’t we do something positive for once?” Gretchen asked. “What about the idea of writing and singing a song together?”

“Sooooo not going to happen!” Michael and Diego said simultaneously.

“Hey, I know what we can do,” Steve said. “Mrs. Peabody said we could focus on the positive stuff. So, let’s focus on hope. Let’s give hope to people; it is the holiday season after all.”

“And how, exactly, are we supposed to do that?” Michael said. “Mrs. Peabody didn’t teach us that.”

“I don’t know,” Steve replied. “How hard can it be? Hey Siri, how do you give hope to people?”

“Here’s what I found,” Steve’s phone responded.

“See, I told you it couldn’t be that hard. Here’s an article called *7 Ways to Bring Hope and Spread Kindness*,” Steve said, reading from his phone. “‘Bringing hope can go a long way to... blah, blah, blah.’ Here we go: ‘1): Demonstrate love and care; 2): make them feel they deserve happiness; 3): show them acceptance; 4): offer help; 5) show them appreciation; 6) nurture relationships; and 7) help them find their passion.’ I don’t think we have to do all 7, do you? I mean, how could we ‘help someone find their passion?’ But we could do some of the

suggestions, and if we do them secretly to surprise people, I've got the perfect name we can call ourselves: The Hope Bandits."

"Don't bandits steal things from people?" Gretchen asked. "I thought we were going to *give* them hope."

"We are. But we should do it secretly, you know, kind of like thieves. Michael, you're the religious one, doesn't it say somewhere in the Bible that God will come like a thief in the night?"

"Well yea, but I think that's like at the beginning of the apocalypse!"

"Whatever. Hope Bandits sounds cool, so that's what I'm going to call us. Now what should we do?"

After brainstorming for a while, they decided to focus on demonstrating love, care, and offering appreciation and help, with Shanice keeping track of which methods on the list they could check off and writing up the final report. "I'm very organized and good at taking notes," she insisted. First on their list, was Gretchen's old piano teacher, Mrs. Olsen, who lived down the street from her.

"She lives all by herself," Gretchen said. "I don't think I've seen anyone go in or out of her house to visit since the pandemic began. She must be so lonely. She probably thinks no one cares about her."

Shanice came up with the idea of what to do. "You know those companies that will, like, cover people's lawns with flamingos and stuff for birthdays? We should do that, so she wakes up and sees love all over her lawn. Doing that we could check off numbers 1 and 5."

"Yea nothing says love and appreciation like flamingos," Michael said.

"Knock it off. We don't have to do flamingos, obviously. I will see what else they have.... Look, this one has hearts. Let's do hearts! Oh, but it's kind of expensive. Where are we going to come up with \$120?"

"We can just make them ourselves with some sticks and colored paper," Diego suggested. "Think about how many years we had to make Valentines for our whole classes? My basement is still filled with that kind of stuff cause my little sister still has to do it. If we each do 20 it won't take long, and that will be 100 which will look good. Then Gretchen can sneak over and stick them in her lawn at night."

A few days later, Mrs. Olsen awoke to see a yard full of hearts. "Who would do this?" she thought standing in her driveway with tears in her eyes. Watching from down the street through binoculars, Gretchen smiled. "Score!" she thought to herself.

"Is it your birthday?" Mrs. Olsen's neighbor Jerry McIntyre asked when he went out to get his paper and saw her standing there. "No," she said. "That's the amazing thing. I don't know who did this. Look, these are homemade! It's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me," she said.

"Hmmm," thought Jerry, who was a reporter for the local paper. "This is just the feel-good story I was looking for."

"I want to pick the next one," Steve said when the Bandits reconvened online, oblivious to what their project had inspired. "I heard my mom talking last night about a friend of hers

whose husband was just deployed for like, a year or something really long. Her friend has a 7-year-old boy and is also working from home. There's got to be something we can do to help them."

"We could send the father a care package with Christmas cookies," Michael said. "When my dad was deployed a couple years ago, he liked getting packages from us."

"That's good. My mom can probably get the address for us without revealing what we're going to do," Steve replied. "But what about the mom and kid?"

"I bet the kid misses doing stuff with his dad," Michael said. "I did."

"Yeah, and the mom probably really needs a break," Gretchen added. "Maybe you could babysit?"

"During a pandemic?" Steve replied.

"Well, outside you could. You could play catch with him, or let him play with that RC drone you're so obsessed with, or take him to the park. The parks are still open."

"I actually wouldn't mind doing that. I'm so sick of being inside in my house. But if I offer, then it wouldn't be a secret."

"Well, that's true, but it would still be a nice, out-of-the-blue surprise. Send her some gift certificates in the mail good for hours of playtime with her son. When she opens her mail, it will be like an unexpected gift of hope and help. She knows your family so she trusts you. I don't think we should be so focused on being bandits that we don't do good stuff."

"I'm gonna check off number 4 and 6 for this one," Shanice added to no one in particular.

While the Bandits were at work baking cookies, creating gift certificates, and more, a little news story appeared in the local *GAZETTE*: "*Local Resident Surprised by Love.*" The article told Mrs. Olsen's story, and quoted her saying, "It really fills a person with hope, you know, that there are still people out there in the world who think of others this way." "The identity of the gift giver is still a mystery," the article concluded. "But what a happy one! We can all feel better knowing that there are love fairies on the loose in our town."

"Love fairies?!" Steve said to his friends when they heard from their parents about the story. "Is he serious? It's Hope Bandits, dude, not fairies! Geez."

"Who cares?" Gretchen said. "Our project is working. Mrs. Olsen was encouraged, and you know that your offer of babysitting was a hit. Mrs. Rawlings was thrilled, and I bet Mr. Rawlings will be getting our package soon. So, what's next? I think we should do at least one more for our project."

"Yea," Shanice added, "We still need numbers 2 and 3, even if we're going to skip seven."

"I heard my parents talking about a family they know, the Garcias," Diego said. "Both the mom and dad lost their jobs. They are from Guatemala and are really struggling. They have a bunch of kids. I'm not sure how many."

"My church helps people like that all the time with food and clothing and Christmas presents and stuff," Michael said. "I could see if they could help them."

"But then we wouldn't be doing it ourselves," Diego said. "I don't know if Mrs. Peabody would count that."

"OK. Well, I guess we could do the same things," Michael said. "We could collect bags

of food and clothes, and maybe get some toys and presents. I'm willing to chip in if you guys are, and we could ask our friends for some donations without telling them who the family is or that it's for our final exam. Didn't it say somewhere in that hope article that helping others can inspire hope not just in those who are helped but in the helpers too? We could count this as another part of the project, giving hope to our friends by giving them the chance to help others."

"Hmmm," Shanice said. "We already have a number 4. But I guess we could get bonus points for inspiring others to help too. I'm gonna put that down as 4b for bonus, along with 2 and 3."

"Hey guys, I think we may have already 4b-ed others without realizing it," Gretchen said. "Look at this. It's a follow-up story to the one on Mrs. Olsen. It seems that other people liked our share-hope-through-lawn-art idea. This says that lawn signs have been popping up all over town all of a sudden. Mrs. Olsen herself ordered stars and angels from a company and had them put in her best friend's yard. Someone else woke up to little snowmen; another house had little "joy" signs everywhere, and the nursing home down on the corner of 4th and Wesson had someone plant a whole garden of paper flowers outside the big window that the residents look out. It seems like we have started a trend."

"Wow!" Shanice said. "Who knew that hope was contagious? I'm definitely gonna mention that in our conclusion."

It took a while to gather everything together for the Garcia family. But people were very generous. They ended up with everything from bags of groceries and clothing, to gently-used bikes and other toys for the kids.

"Here's what we should do," Steve said. "We should wait until it's really late, and then unload all the stuff on their doorstep. Then, we will ring the doorbell and run. It will take a minute for them to wake up and get to the door, so we will have time to hide and watch what happens."

Rejoicing in the freedom of getting to stay out late for once with their parents' permission, the Bandits met at the Garcia's house and carefully arranged everything on their front steps with a big sign that said, "Feliz Navidad!" Then they rang the doorbell and ran. A few minutes later, Mr. Garcia cautiously opened the door. "Dios mio!" he cried looking up and down the street. He ran back inside and woke up his wife and kids, who immediately began squealing when they saw the bikes. "Did Santa do this?" his daughter asked.

"I don't know honey," he replied. "I did not ask Santa for this, but I did pray to God to help us. I think this must be from God." Still looking up and down at the empty street as if to confirm his hunch, Mr. Garcia added, "It's a Christmas miracle."

Steve and Michael high-fived behind the bushes where they were hiding. "That was so awesome!" Steve said, as they headed back to their cars a few streets over. "Yea," Michael said. "You wanted to be like God coming in the night, and he reacted as if we were."

"You know, I feel so great right now," Steve replied. "All Fall I have been totally depressed. This is our senior year, the year we're supposed to rule the school. And instead, we've been stuck at home with our parents breathing down our necks like we're in elementary school or something. I was going to be on varsity soccer this year! Then that got taken away along with

everything else. Doing this project is like the first time I have actually felt good in months. It's kind of thrilling, you know, being a Hope Bandit. I want to do some more."

"The thrill of hope, a weary world rejoices," Michael said.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"It's in that Christmas carol, *O Holy Night*: 'The thrill of hope the weary world rejoices for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.'"

"Okay. Well, speaking of which I have to get home soon, or my parents will be less than thrilled that I am out so close to 'a new and glorious morn.' But listen, did you say your church does this kind of stuff all the time?"

"Yea. Jesus came to give love and hope and help to people. He told us to do the same. I guess he was sort of the first Hope Bandit."

"Do you think maybe I could get involved with some of that?" Steve asked. "I want to keep doing this even after we turn in the project to Mrs. Peabody."

"Oh my gosh," interrupted Shanice, who had been walking along quietly with the others listening to the boys' conversation. "Did what I think just happened happen?"

"What?" the others said.

"I think Steve just found his passion! That's number 7. We completed the whole list!"

Steve smiled. "I told you being Hope Bandits would be cool. Get ready to be thrilled, weary world, 'cause hope is on the loose in town! And it feels good."

Thanks be to God! Amen.