



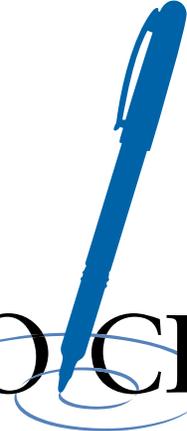
**About the Author**

The Rev. J. Kenneth Asel was ordained in 1973 and has served in Louisiana, Texas, North Carolina, Wyoming, and Tennessee. He retired in 2015 and has since been an interim in East Tennessee and for the Diocese of Argyll & the Isles for the Scottish Episcopal Church. He and his wife, Devvie, reside in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina. He can be reached by email at [kenasel@gmail.com](mailto:kenasel@gmail.com).

**About Vintage Voice**

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# VINTAGE VOICE



## The Unexpected Blessing of Christmas in Retirement

**By the Rev. J. Kenneth Asel**

Two days before my first Christmas in retirement, I received a telephone call from my last assistant. The parish I served in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, included approximately one-third part-time residents. While most of our seasonal communicants spent the summer with us, many also returned for a few weeks around Christmas and we went to great lengths to help them feel included. My assistant was calling to ask about some of the things I normally did at Christmas to assist this process.

After a lengthy conversation, I found myself unexpectedly nostalgic. I was ordained in 1973 at the age of 24, so for want of a better term, I am a “lifer” in the priesthood. I had announced my retirement some 16 months in advance to assist in an orderly transition, which the congregation in its 100+ years had never experienced. St. John’s in Jackson Hole is a very active congregation and I was well aware of how tired I was as my leaving date of March 1, 2015, approached.

Retirement didn’t work out for me quite as I’d expected. On the first day of retirement I learned I had prostate cancer, so much of my first year was taken up with anxiety about my health and frequent trips to MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. I had also taken a part-time interim position to “wind down slowly” from more than 40 years as a priest. Certainly I would not have done so if I had known about my cancer, so we have had to work together to get through these unexpected developments. That “working things through” remains an ongoing process.

As I got off the phone with my assistant, I found myself missing so many things about Christmas in “the Hole.” There was the adrenalin rush of seven services and 1,200+ in attendance on Christmas, even in the snow, and sometimes there was lots of it! There were the financial pressures that every priest recognizes to be a part of December. There was a large staff to thank and not overwork, outreach projects to complete and sermons to write, receptions to attend to and musicians to placate. Oh, I also have the most wonderful wife ever, who would appreciate some attention as well.

In contrast, the parish I serve as interim is much less complex and prefers to have me stand in the background. I was bewildered to have time on my hands. “What am I here for?” was my frequent interior question.

It was only on the Sunday after Christmas, when I sat in a pew of a parish where I had been rector in the decade before I was called to Jackson Hole, that I was able to come to terms with Christmas in a new role. There, I was able to pray and sing, to pass the peace without worrying what was coming next, and noting who was — or who wasn't — there. While there were people back in Wyoming I missed seeing and a Christmas dinner with parishioners I looked forward to every year, I have found my new stage of life to be actually quite an unexpected blessing.



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