

What was I thinking?

for Sunday, December 13, 2020



Telling our story

We're going through a difficult year. I don't think that needs to be explained yet again. Charles Dickens begins *A Christmas Carol* explaining, at length and repeatedly, that Jacob Marley is dead, and that must be understood "or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate." The same could be said of our difficult year and the story we're going to relate tomorrow morning.

I think it's good to remember that we're not the first people in history to go through hard times (though that doesn't mean our struggles aren't valid).

In 1918, many were grieving the loss of loved ones in WWI, and struggling to recover from the horrors of that war. Eric-Milner White, Dean of King's College, Cambridge, a former chaplain during the war, was looking for a creative way to present the Christmas narrative. He took a service done years earlier at Truro Cathedral and created Lessons and Carols much as we know it today. He said, "the main theme is the development of the loving purposes of God, from the Creation to the Incarnation." Out of a difficult time came something beautiful. Out of darkness came light.



This picture was recently discovered by my sister in the bottom of a dresser drawer. The man on the right is my grandfather, John Duncan MacLean, who served in WWI. The picture was taken 11/20/1918 in France.

The first lesson is a reading from Genesis, the beginning of our story. It's about humanity straying from God. It's about the first sin. After that we hear the words of prophets telling us that a Messiah will come to save us from our sins. Gradually, the story unfolds. We get to the part where Jesus is born, and in the ninth lesson, we hear the words of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." All the way back to the beginning.

The service traditionally begins with a hymn that tells the story, "Once in Royal David's City." Many modern hymnals don't include all six stanzas, which is a shame. This is stanza 4:

For he is our childhood's pattern, day by day like us he grew,

he was little, weak, and helpless, tears and smiles like us he knew;
and he feelth for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness.

God took on human flesh. Jesus was born and he grew up. He knew tears and smiles, and he shared our sadness and our gladness. This has been a year of tears and sadness for sure, but we've had good times too and we will again. What's important for us to hear is that God is with us, no matter what.

What is usually the last stanza in modern hymnals begins: "And our eyes at last shall see him," and ends: "and he leads his children on to the place where he is gone." But that's not the end. Where is the place he's gone? When and where will our eyes at last see him? Here is stanza 6:

Not in that poor lowly stable, with the oxen standing by,
we shall see him; but in heaven, set at God's right hand on high
when like stars his children crowned all in white shall wait around.

The Bidding Prayer that is part of Lessons and Carols calls us to "remember those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light." Every year that moves me to tears, both in the King's College radio broadcast on Christmas Eve and in our own Lessons and Carols. Every year that "multitude which no one can number" grows and more people that you and I knew are included. My mother is now among them. That's hard. But it does say that they rejoice with us.

Last Christmas, as my mother continued to decline, she was bound to her bed. We struggled to find ways to help her feel Christmas. We put decorations up where she could see them from the bed. She always loved Christmas, decorating, making cookies, and listening to music. I asked her if she wanted to listen to some of her Christmas CDs and she said "yes." I asked if she wanted me to move her CD player into her room so she could hear the music. She said "no." She told me to leave the CD player in the other room, to put on the music and to turn it up. She told me to prop open her door. "I want this whole place filled with music." I don't know that her assisted living facility would have agreed to that, but Mom wanted that Christmas music to be heard by all. The Bidding Prayer says something about that too: "let us make this house of prayer glad with our carols of praise."

This year, a lot of us are confined and unable to get to church. Don't let that stop you. Sunday morning, turn on our service and turn it up. Print out the hymns and fill your house (and your neighbors'?) with carols of praise.

I remember playing for a funeral many years ago, close to Christmas. One of the hymns chosen (not by me) was *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. I was young and naïve and didn't understand how this could be appropriate for a funeral. Then I paid attention to the last stanza, which includes these words:

Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more many die,
born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!"

Tomorrow, as we tell and hear the story, the whole story, make your house glad with carols of praise.



Prelude	<i>Prelude on IRBY</i>	Phillip Moore
Hymn	<i>Once in Royal David's City</i>	IRBY
First Lesson	Genesis 3:8-19	Adam and Eve disobey God
Carol	<i>This is the Truth Sent from Above</i>	James Kirkby
Second Lesson	Genesis 22: 15-18	God's promise to Abraham
Hymn 9	<i>O Come, O Come, Emmanuel</i>	VENI EMMANUEL
Third Lesson	Isaiah 9: 2, 6-7	A great light in the darkness

Carol	<i>People, Look East</i>	Malcolm Archer
Fourth Lesson	Isaiah 11: 1-9	A little child will lead them
Carol	<i>Lo, How A Rose E'er Blooming</i>	Dale Adelman
Fifth Lesson	Luke 1: 26-35, 38	An angel appears to Mary
Carol	<i>In dulci jubilo</i>	Ian Higginson
Sixth Lesson	Luke 2: 1-7	Mary gives birth in Bethlehem
Hymn 44	<i>O Little Town of Bethlehem</i>	ST. LOUIS
Seventh Lesson	Luke 2: 8-16	Angels announce the Messiah
Carol	<i>It Came Upon the Midnight Clear</i>	David Ashley White
Eighth Lesson	Matthew 2: 1-11	Magi come from the East
Hymn 53	<i>What Child Is This</i>	GREENSLEEVES
Ninth Lesson	John 1: 1-14	And the word became flesh
Offertory Carol	<i>In the Bleak Midwinter</i>	Harold Darke
Hymn 31	<i>Hark! The Herald Angels Sing</i>	MENDELSSOHN
Postlude	<i>In dulci jubilo</i>	Johann Sebastian Bach

God be with you till we meet again.

John