

What was I thinking?

Christmas 2020



I don't know about you, but I'm tired. I'm usually tired this time of year, with all that goes on in Advent and Christmas, but it's usually a good, satisfied tired. There's a little of that, but for the most part, I'm not tired in a good way. I miss our choirs rehearsing and singing. I miss every single one of you, choir members and extended choir family too. I'm tired and in all honesty, I'm sad.

I'm sorry I didn't get an article out for this past Sunday. There was one in the works, but the words just wouldn't come, not in any way that made sense. My mother was finally laid to rest last Friday in a simple graveside service. Due to our strange times, it took place more than eight months after she passed away. While I feel a sense of peace in some ways now that it's finally done, I didn't expect (though I should have) that it would feel like a scab has been pulled off opening an old wound, and it hurts as much as it ever did and more. It's like she just died last week. If you are a Harry Potter fan, you've read about the dementors, these dark, ghostly, grim reaper type characters float around looking for victims. They don't kill people. What they do is suck all the happiness out of people. The author J. K. Rowling has said she got the ideas of dementors from her own struggles with depression. It sucks all the happiness out of you. Some say happiness is a choice, but I'm not sure that's always the case. I don't think anyone really wants to be depressed. But there's a lot of it around in these difficult days. I'm not at all alone.

I know, I'm not supposed to be writing about things like that now because it's Christmas. I should be writing about all of our Christmas carols. Each one could be an article by itself. I should be writing about a warm and fuzzy scene with a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger, with a heavenly light shining down on a peaceful and perfect Mary and Joseph. Oh, and shepherds too, and angels, and magi with camels and rare gifts. That's the story our carols tell us, right? We can drink eggnog and listen to beautiful music by the Christmas tree and think about how perfect it all is.

It looks perfect, doesn't it?



It looks curiously clean for a stable or wherever Jesus was born. So, do our Christmas story and our carols tell it like it was? In some places the carols do, if we look closely.

If we have learned anything this year, it's that life can be hard, really hard. This year has been hard but I don't think it's the first time humanity has struggled. I don't think God came down here in the form of Jesus to give us an unrealistic fairy tale to allow us to escape our troubles. I think Jesus came as Emmanuel, God with us, to live as a human with us and to share our pain and our joy.

Last Sunday, I played a postlude on a hymn many of you probably don't know, but it's in our current hymnal, and it's in the new one: *From Heaven Above*. Martin Luther wrote the text (originally 14 stanzas, I think) for his children to sing at home as they acted out their Christmas story. They had a Christmas pageant at home (and without a livestream!). It starts with the angel coming to bring us good news. The third stanza in our hymnal is one that always gets my attention with these words: "This is the Christ,

God's Son most high, who hears your sad and bitter cry." God heard our sad, bitter cries and came down to live among us.

If you really pay attention to the words of some of our favorite Christmas carols, you'll see, hear, and sing this same message. Do you recognize any of these phrases?

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.
(from O Little Town of Bethlehem)*

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

*And ye, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow,
look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing:
O rest beside the weary road, and hear the angels sing.
(from It Came Upon the Midnight Clear)*

That last one always gets to me, though I think too many of us sing our cheerful carols without paying much attention to the words. But this year, I think we all know what it's like beneath life's crushing load, with forms bending low, toiling along with painful steps and slow.

At Christmas, we are reminded that the news is good. We're not promised a life without struggle, pain, sickness, and death, but we are promised that in our darkness, there is and there will be light. In our dark streets shines the everlasting life. "Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings."

When we decided my mother's burial would be in December, part of me dreaded that. It's not something I wanted to be one of my Christmas memories. I didn't want my mother's death to have any association with Christmas. Then I remembered last year when Mom told me to put on her Christmas music, open the door to her assisted living apartment, and turn up the volume. She wanted the whole place filled with Christmas music. I e-mailed Henry Frantz, who graciously agreed to play the bagpipes for Mom's graveside service, and I asked "can you play *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* on the bagpipes?" He said he'd give it a try and call me back. It turned out he could play it. So, I e-mailed the Methodist minister doing the service and told him my idea. I

knew he would agree since it's an old Charles Wesley hymn. He included in the service those lines from the hymn, "born that we no more may die, born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth." The bagpiper concluded the service playing *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. Playing on a hillside, the bagpipes carried that carol and its good news over our weary world.

That's the point of Christmas. There is hope. There is light in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. We are invited to rest beside our weary road, and hear the angels sing.

Merry Christmas, and may God bless us, every one.

God be with you till we meet again.

John