

What was I thinking?

January 3, 2021



Happy 10th day of Christmas (at least on Sunday), and Happy New Year. I don't really consider the celebrations to be over. The same commercial retail world that started throwing Christmas at us before Halloween (really to sell us things) has also been quick to throw it out. I'm always amazed when I walk into stores on December 26 and see no trace of Christmas, as if it never happened. I hope they paid the employees well who worked hard after closing time on the 24th to get it all out of sight. I don't get it. We're still in the season of Christmas, nearing the end of the 12 days but not there quite yet.

After the 12 days, we have the day and season of Epiphany. In some cultures, January 6 was called "old Christmas," and gifts were given then. The magi were said to bring gifts, so that makes some sense. One of the symbols of Christmas and Epiphany is light, the light that came to dispel our darkness. Epiphany is a continuation of the celebration of Christ coming to live among us. In these dark days of winter, it seems we would want to continue enjoying light, symbolically and literally. Why take down our beautiful decorations and lights? (We're leaving them up at our house!) Or as the Ghost of Christmas Past in Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* said, "Would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give?" I say continue the celebration. We need it this year.

As we follow our liturgical narrative this Sunday, Jesus is growing up quickly. He's twelve years old, and already he's causing his parents grief by running away in a crowd. One of our hymns will be *O Sing a Song of Bethlehem*. The title sounds like a Christmas carol, and the first stanza is about the birth of Jesus. It includes the phrase "the light that shone on Bethlehem fills all the world today." The stanzas continue,

singing a song of Nazareth and sunny days, of Galilee and the life and work of Jesus, and finally we sing of Calvary.

Another hymn we'll sing tomorrow is one we've used as a prayer for illumination, *O Word of God Incarnate*, which includes the line "O Truth, unchanged, unchanging, O Light of our dark sky." In the hymn, the church is called to receive the gift of a Savior and to follow the light to guide us on life's voyage, "amid the rocks and quicksands." The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, through good and bad.

We did just have a celebration of the New Year. It's almost as if we think some magic reset button is pushed as midnight comes, and all of our problems disappear. This year more than ever, we would like that. We want things to change, to go back to "normal," or move ahead past our current struggles. It doesn't work quite that way. But, we made it for another trip around the sun, so I guess that's worth celebrating. We also have things to be thankful for, even in the worst of times, and we do need to have hope for the year to come. It's funny how have our traditions and our superstitions to help. (Anybody eat black-eyed peas?)

Sunday, we have a treat in store for us. One of our youth who said she really missed singing is going to be our soloist. Ann Harper Covington is going to be our soloist and lead our service music. She's going to sing one of my favorite pieces, *A New Year Carol* by Benjamin Britten:

Here we bring new water from the well so clear,
For to worship God with, this happy New Year.
*Refrain: Sing levy dew, sing levy dew, the water and the wine;
The seven bright gold wires and the bugles that do shine.*
Sing reign of Fair Maid, with gold upon her toe,
Open you the West Door and turn the Old Year go. *Refrain*
Sing reign of Fair Maid, with gold upon her chin,
Open you the East Door, and let the New Year in. *Refrain*

Have a listen (and skip the political ads as soon as you can):

[A New Year Carol - YouTube](#)

There is a custom in Pembrokeshire for children to collect fresh water from a well and go around with an evergreen branch sprinkling and blessing people they saw. They also asked for food and money, but that's what carolers did. There is also a

tradition of opening the doors of houses, to let the old year out (with a good swift kick in the rear this year), and letting the new year in.



Llanllawer Holy Well, an ancient spring at Pembrokeshire.

Then there's "levy dew." What's that? No one knows for sure, but some way the phrase in Welsh means "a cry to God." In French, it could be *levez à Dieu*, which means "raise to God," as in lifting up the communion elements, which we will do during communion on Sunday morning.

Speaking of the French, and since we're still technically in the Christmas season, I'm going to play some French noëls, which are organ arrangements of popular French Christmas carols. To French people living in the 1700s, the tunes would have been as well-known to them as *Joy to the World* is to us. Modern listeners may not know the tunes, but these pieces have a certain charm that seems to strike a joyful chord in our hearts today.

I'm getting ahead of myself here, but there's a Bach piece I (and many other organists around the world) usually play on the first Sunday in January called *In You Is Gladness*. I'm saving it for next week. The text, meant for the New Year, begins: "In you is gladness amid all suffering."

I just read that Bach wrote a cantata to commemorate the end of a terrible year. He probably had many. There were difficulties in his jobs, he had a crummy apartment to live in, his teaching job at St. Thomas was a nightmare at times, students and staff suffered from deadly illnesses. Bach had twenty children, but a number of them died young, if not at birth, and he is said to have had one who was mentally disabled and

needed constant care. Yet in spite of troubles, Bach was still able to write joyous music. You'll have to wait until next week to hear just how joyful.

We're in a new year, but we are not out of our time of darkness and we need the light.

One last time for this year, Merry Christmas, and may God bless us, every one.

God be with you till we meet again.

John