

North Kildonan United Church

11th December 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Isaiah 35: 1-10

Matthew 11: 2-11

O God, beginning and end, by whose command time runs its course: bless our impatience, perfect our faith, and, while we await the fulfillment of your promises, grant us hope in your Word. Amen.

Back in the day when the United Churches of Winnipeg were clustered together into an aptly named organization called Winnipeg Presbytery, back when lay representatives and clergy met monthly to make decisions and set policy and be informed of important issues, back when these regular meetings made for a strong sense of collegiality and mutual cooperation amongst congregations and their ministers, back then there was a group of worship and music enthusiasts who banded themselves together into what was known as the Hymn/Worship Committee.

I was a member of that committee and our mandate was to present to the members of presbytery and to congregations, the richness of the Christian tradition of liturgy and music. When new hymnbooks came along, such as Voices United, we organized workshops and presentations to help generate interest in the new book. We brought in preachers and speakers, hymn writers and hymn composers, from across Canada and the United States to help expand our understanding of the wonders of worship, and we supported as much as we could the liturgical life in Winnipeg and beyond.

We did some good work back then and ever since the committee has kept in touch through occasional potluck suppers. I should add that each supper begins with a hymn-sing, thus keeping alive our original mandate to encourage and explore the rich musical traditions of the Church.

Our most recent gathering was last week. As usual, the dinner conversation covered many topics. We got talking about the fact that this is summertime in the southern hemisphere, which means that as we endure cold and brief days of sunshine and even colder and longer nights right now, those in Australia and New Zealand and other southern lands are enjoying warm temperatures and long days of sunshine. For us, the days will continue to grow shorter and shorter until the Winter Solstice 10 days from now. And then we will slowly gain a bit more sunshine each day until the Summer Solstice in June.

Which means that our friends in the South will soon experience shorter days and cooler temperatures, though perhaps not as cool as Winnipeg experienced earlier this past week.

Now none of this meteorological information is news to you but this observation might be. As we struggle through the cold and dark of December, we are surrounded by the light of Christmas. On our streets, homes are brightly illuminated with Christmas lights and often more than just one string of lights. Christmas trees covered with lights and ornaments hold honoured places in the front rooms and living rooms and family rooms of the nation. A trip along Portage Avenue offers a downtown fully lit up with a multitude of coloured lights, and our churches, especially ours, are festively decorated with the customs of the season. Everywhere in the darkness of our pre-Winter Solstice, there is light, the light of Christmas, the light which those of faith see pointing to the birth of One who is the Light of the World. What would December be like if there was no Christmas to bring light to our darkness? One Advent affirmation found in Voices United, meant to be sung each Sunday of the season as the darkness grows longer, says: “Kindle a flame to lighten the dark and take all fear away.”

Contrast our experience with the southern hemisphere. When, for example, those in the most southerly part of New Zealand reach their Winter Solstice, when their days are short and their nights long and dark, and the heat of the summer is gone, there is no Christmas to lighten their hearts. As we struggle through December, we have Christmas to look forward to, Christmas with all the festivities and family gatherings and special music and nostalgic programmes on TV, Christmas which urges us to reconnect with those whom we have not talked with for a long while, Christmas which invites us to hope once again.

The person at the table who made this observation about the different ways northern and southern hemispheres experience the Winter Solstice emphasised this one conviction. Without Christmas, in the darkness of winter, what is there to look forward to? It’s worth pondering, because as humans, we need something to look forward to. Something to break into our everyday routine, something to give us a lift, a smile, a reason to get on with the day. We need something to look forward to.

In our reading from Isaiah we find words of hope and promise offered to a people in dire circumstances. Words that gave the people something to look forward to, something to trust when all seemed lost and gone.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.’

“Then the eyes of blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters

shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.”

Centuries later these words would inspire Handel to compose his great masterpiece, *Messiah*.

Robertson Davies, the great Canadian author, spoke of the importance of learning scripture at an early age. He said that the words of the Bible might not make sense when first read by a child or young person, but in time they can become, in his words, like time bombs within us, sources of strength in times of trial, sources of wisdom and direction in times of temptation, sources of hope and joy when all is well. Earlier our young people read scripture as part of their drama. What time bombs might be planted within them when they read or speak the scriptures? Worth pondering.

Good poetry and excellent music do the same for us. They are ways that God speaks to us, especially in those times when we need something good and positive to look forward to, times when our own strength and will are not enough, times when we are unsure what to do.

At last week’s gathering, before we had supper, we gathered in the living room to sing hymns. We looked a bit at the texts and examined the message the hymn writer was trying to express. A few hymns were new to me but they were all excellent and a delight to sing.

I want to leave you with some words from a hymn we didn’t sing. In 1715, Isaac Watts, the author of *Joy to the World* and *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, to name but two of his many compositions, he wrote a Christmas carol known appropriately enough as *Watts Cradle Song*.

In the carol the author contrasts the comparative luxury of his own infant sleeping in a comfortable cradle to the harsh conditions Jesus faced at this birth.

*How much better thou’rt attended
Than the Son of God could be
When from heaven he descended
And became a child like thee.*

But Isaac ends the carol with this verse, which I suggest might be our prayer for all our children, our young people and indeed for ourselves.

*Mayst thou live to know and fear him,
Trust and love him all thy days:
Then go dwell for ever near him,
See his face and sing his praise. Amen.*