

North Kildonan United Church

3rd January 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“The New Year”

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Ephesians 3: 1-12

Matthew 2: 1-12

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

“A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.”

So begins *The Journey of the Magi*, a poem written in 1927 by T.S. Elliot. For years I've included this poem in the Epiphany service because it describes so wonderfully the travails of those travellers from the East, travellers following a star, trusting that their journey will find it's fulfillment in the presence of a newborn king. And not just any king, but the one who is born king of the Jews.

Over the years I've appreciated the depth of description Elliot uses, as he reflects on the haughty camels and their ill-behaved grooms, the challenges of travel in strange and unfamiliar lands, complete with being overcharged by innkeepers and always the self-doubts haunting these wise men. As he writes: "With the voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly."

But this year, it is Elliot's opening words that to me seem to sum up the months of pandemic we have been struggling through.

“A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year for a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.”

The poem continues.

“And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.

Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,

And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.

At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.

Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.

But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down

This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

The child that the Magi travelled so far for, struggled so long and hard to get to, this child was destined to be the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Through him, through Jesus, a new way was begun. The Magi, Gentiles from a foreign land, represent the first non-Jews to kneel in homage to Jesus, the first Gentiles to honour the Christ. And after the resurrection, the early church would preach the gospel to Gentiles as well as to Jews, to Gentiles such as us who are born into the family of God through the waters of baptism. As St Paul in Ephesians puts it: "the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

The Magi followed the light of a star, the light that led them to leave their comfortable homes in the East and risk everything to come to Jesus. Light in the darkness of a midnight sky. Light that drew them closer to the promise, a promise that they barely understood yet they knew deep down within them that the promise was true, that the promise was from God.

That guiding light continues to this day, shining not in the sky but in our hearts, as we trust that God is with us in all our joys and our sorrows, all our opportunities and our challenges, in all our hopes and especially in all our fears. "*God is our refuge and strength, a very help in trouble*" the Psalmist proclaims and so we believe.

We stand at the beginning of a new year. We have suffered much this past year but we look in hope to a new beginning in 2021, a year of grace and promise, a year of restored health for all. As we travel through this New Year, we rely upon the light of Christ within our lives, the light we receive from and give to those whom we love, the light we kindle within us through prayer and worship and deeds of kindness, the light of hope that is slowly dawning upon the world.

This year, of all years, deserves this poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, which is entitled "Ring Out Wild Bells." It has the theme of casting away the negatives of the past year and embracing the promise of this New Year.

*Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,
The flying cloud, the frosty light:
The year is dying in the night;
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.*

*Ring out the old, ring in the new,
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.*

*Ring out the grief that saps the mind
For those that here we see no more;
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind.*

*Ring out a slowly dying cause,
And ancient forms of party strife;
Ring in the nobler modes of life,
With sweeter manners, purer laws.*

*Ring out the want, the care, the sin,
The faithless coldness of the times;*

*Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes
But ring the fuller minstrel in.*

*Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good.*

*Ring out old shapes of foul disease;
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.*

*Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be. Amen.*

Prayer after sermon

*God, bless the coming year
And give us in your mercy
Time for the task, peace for the pathway,
Wisdom for the work, and love to the last,
For Jesus's sake. Amen.*

Video

In the Bleak Mid-Winter

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