



Sunday, December 27, 2020

## Endings and Beginnings

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*Psalm 147:12-20; John 1:10-18*

Before there was Disney — before there was the animated feature film, *Frozen* — there was a poem, with words that anticipated that film's most famous song, "Let It Go." It goes like this:

*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.*

The stanza is from a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) called "Ring Out, Wild Bells," which forms part of a longer elegy, titled *In Memoriam*. We are there aren't we? We are at the place where the year is going. It is more than a quaint old sentiment. It is a theological truth, that God is doing something new. And so, what will we do about it?

Rick Whiting of CRN.com has written an article called "Top 10 News Stories of 2020 (So Far)." I like that "So Far" at the end, because it isn't over until it's over; and no matter who sings, or leaves the building, we have a little bit of time left before the stroke of midnight. Can we all agree that the year 2020 (so far) has been like no other? Can we say that 2020 got off to a promising start but things went downhill quickly after that? Can we say that 2020 brought us the COVID-19 pandemic, which yielded illness, death, a shuttered economy, a recession, and a new work-from-home reality for millions? Can we say that 2020 brought an already unsettled nation widespread protests against racial injustice after the death of George Floyd? Can we say that 2020 brought about a presidential election that was and continues to be particularly challenging?

Reflecting on the year as it is about to close, I wonder what will have a lasting impact upon you — and whether you will want to sing along with Alfred Lord Tennyson, "The year is going, let him go."

One year giving way to the next is a sort of hinge in the way we mark time. We are closing the door to 2020, and yet it is the same door that is opening to 2021. So if we seek to bring our faith to bear as fast away the old year passes, it may be worthwhile to remind ourselves that the event of Jesus coming into the world is what we call the Hinge of History.

Don't let anyone tell you that the world has never changed as profoundly or as fast as in 2020. The reality is, 2,020 years ago, give or take, the world changed more profoundly, and just as quickly. Because Jesus came. Jesus came into a world of darkness and became its light. Jesus came into a place of uncertainty and became its way. Jesus came into a place of desperation and became its salvation. Jesus came into a world of despair and became its everlasting hope. The transformational moment of all of history happened when Jesus was born.

In his prelude to his Gospel, John brings this almost indescribable moment into focus. "He was in the world!" How awesome is that? God was not far off, aloof, and distant; God was near at hand, engaged, up close and personal.

The world did not know Him. It was as if He was a royal personage, traveling incognito: the Prince who had exchanged His place with the pauper, like a celebrity who puts on a ball cap and sunglasses and thereby mingles with others without being recognized, in order to be among us, and know us, and become known. But the world knew Him not.

He came to what was His own, and His own people did not accept Him. We know John means He came to His own people, the Jews, and they missed out in knowing He was the Messiah. But then again, people have been missing that truth ever since. And the reality is, all people are His people. All people are the focus of His love. All people are the subject of His efforts. All people are the recipients of His grace, if they but choose to accept it.

“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,” John would say two chapters later in his Gospel.

But His own people did not accept Him. Maybe it is human nature that people don’t accept what is good and right and true; what is good for them, and the world around them; what is right — when so many wrongheaded notions seem so compelling; what is true — when any number of falsehoods masquerade as fact.

As much as we might hope for 2021 to be better than 2020, we know that the arrival of Jesus among us was more earth-changing than any other reality. The truth of Jesus is as old as His arrival. And yet, the power of Jesus is as new as today, and as profound as the unwritten pages of tomorrow. Jesus will be at work, where and how He determines is best, every moment of every day of 2021. That makes me hopeful. I hope it makes you hopeful, as well. I hope that you can look forward in faith to the year before you, and that you can find ways to look back in thankfulness to the year that is behind you.

It is more than a quaint old sentiment. It is a theological truth: God is doing something new. What are we going to do about it? It is possible that the opportunity before us, on this last Sunday of 2020, is to treat it as the first Sunday of a new year in which we emulate Christ’s love, and actualize God’s activity. So that we may come among others, as God comes among us in Jesus — in grace, in mercy, in love. So that the Lord’s light may continue shining in even the darkest of places.

“The year is going, let him go; Ring out the false, ring in the true.” In Christ may it be so. Amen.