

# What was I thinking?

December 12, 2021



## **In the Bleak Midwinter All out of darkness we have light**

In December, 1918, the First World War had just ended. Many were suffering from the trauma war brings, grieving those who had died, and trying to heal physically, mentally, and spiritually. Their faith was shaken if not lost. Eric Milner-White had served as a chaplain for the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, which had fought in many major battles in the war and had lost around 68,000. Milner-White returned to King's College in Cambridge where he had been promoted to Dean. He decided to create a new service out of a desire to offer hope and comfort in that difficult time.

The service was based on one used at Truro Cathedral in the 1880s. The Archbishop of Canterbury created it, in part as an effort to keep the men of Truro out of the pubs until after closing time! Milner-White wanted a service that would offer some sense of certainty and hope. In his words, "The main theme is the development of the loving purposes of God, from the Creation to the Incarnation." And so began the tradition of Lessons and Carols at King's College. Their service is broadcast live around the world on Christmas Eve. The BBC has broadcast it since 1928, with the exception of 1930. The service continued to be held during the Second World War, in spite of

freezing conditions due to the stained-glass windows being removed to protect them from being damaged or destroyed.

The idea of Lessons and Carols has spread around the world, in its “original form” or in various adaptations. I was happy to see it included in the newest edition of our denomination’s *Book of Common Worship*. The Festival of Lessons and Carols that we will have in our church this Sunday at 11:00 is based on that.

The Advent and Christmas seasons can be meaningful in a number of ways. Of course, there is the joyful, warm, and cozy feeling of the season that bring us comfort. The idea of the baby Jesus bathed in warm light surrounded by animals making quiet sounds, shepherds coming to see the baby, angels hovering above, and even the magi there bringing their gifts. It’s a nice scene, but it’s probably not very accurate, historically. We have our personal memories of Christmas past, of decorations in our homes, family gatherings, of lights, shopping, presents, eggnog, etc. Most of us can remember waking up with excitement on Christmas morning to see what presents Santa brought.

And there’s the music, which we all love (though we don’t all agree on exactly what music we love). It does my heart good to know that sacred choral and organ music seem to be embraced more by people during this season.

I love all of those things too. I love to sit by the fire at home, drink eggnog, taking in the beautiful Christmas tree and listening to Christmas music. But, at some point that all seems a bit superficial, even artificial. Is it just a fairy tale escape from reality? A big part of me longs for something with more depth. We all have our personal struggles and losses. We also have the last two years of pain, suffering, broken relationships, death, and all the grief and trauma that go along with those things. We’ve seen so much division and suffering in our country and our world, and at least as I write this, there doesn’t seem to be an end in sight yet. Some have said it feels like we’re living in war time. Maybe not literally, but it has been a time of sacrifice and loss on a large scale. It’s more than candy canes and Christmas carols alone can overcome.

Over time, I’ve discovered deeper meaning in Lessons and Carols. The story doesn’t begin with angels telling Mary and Joseph they will have a child, the Son of God, or even with prophets telling of a coming Messiah, even though those are part of the lessons. The story begins at the beginning, at the creation of human beings and their sin of disobeying God, for which the punishment is death. But that’s not the end of the story. God comes down to live as one of us, as a human in the flesh. As the opening hymn in Lessons and Carols, *Once in Royal David’s City* puts it, “and he feeleth

for our sadness, and he shareth in our gladness.” God also paved the way for eternal life after death in sending Jesus.

Lessons and Carols tells a story, from the beginning. I’m not sure it has a clear ending, as life goes on for us and as the story goes on, but the last lesson from John 1 seems to tie the beginning to the ending. “In the beginning was the Word.” John continues: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Right now, it feels like we’re living in darkness and in many ways, we are. But the darkness did not and cannot overcome the light. One of the carols our choir will sing tomorrow, *On Christmas Night* (aka the Sussex Carol), includes this: “All out of darkness we have light which made the angels sing this night.” Out of the darkness comes our light. The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not, cannot, and will not overcome it.

One of the things that moves me most every year in Lessons and Carols is the bidding prayer. Almost all of us have lost loved ones, whether recently or a long time ago. The memory of them never goes away. Every year that number of loved ones grows, and I am moved to tears when I hear in the Bidding Prayer: “Lastly, let us remember all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no one can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom, in this Lord Jesus, we forevermore are one.”

I hope we can find some light in the midst of our darkness, but even as we struggle in darkness, we should take comfort that those who have gone before us are “in a greater light,” one we can’t even imagine yet, but someday will.

Yes, we’ll sing about the baby Jesus and angels and Mary and Joseph, and it will be beautiful, but let’s not stop there. Let’s dig a little deeper and find something of substance that can help us find light in the midst of our darkness and some healing for our pain. Even in our troubled times let’s do as the prayer says and make this house of prayer glad with our carols of praise.

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the sun of righteousness!  
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* by Charles Wesley)



O come, O come, Emmanuel.

God be with you till we meet again.

John