

What was I thinking?

January 13, 2022



Happy New Year

It's been a while since I've written. My apologies. As you can imagine, things got a little busy in December. As some of my church music colleagues say, Hurricane Noël came through, and I'm still cleaning up the aftermath. After Christmas Eve, like many others who work in churches, I took time off to rest, and the new year has been as busy as ever. This probably won't be a long article, but I wanted to send something.

Though I planned to take a little time off the week between Christmas Day and New Year's Day. I did not plan to miss any Sundays. I wasn't surprised when I started feeling cold symptoms. When the adrenaline that gets me through December wears off, my resistance goes down with it and I usually end up with a cold. But we're not living in "normal" times, so I went for a Covid test and called a substitute to be ready. My test was negative. Since I had a sub ready to play and direct, I took the situation as a sign from God that I needed to rest. I took the Sunday off. (I also knew I would probably get nervous looks from choir members and congregation members if I came in sniffing and sneezing.)

At any rate, while time off is good, I enjoy being in church and I missed doing one of my favorite pieces with the choir, Benjamin Britten's *A New Year Carol*. Some choir

members told me they were questioned about the meaning of the text. What in the world does it mean?

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*

First, keep in mind that it's poetry. Don't try too hard for a literal interpretation. I've heard that analyzing poetry is like trying to analyze a sunset. Just enjoy it.

However, there is a history behind this poem. There is a custom in Pembrokeshire for children to collect fresh water from a well and to go around with an evergreen branch sprinkling and blessing people they saw. They also asked for food and money (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, once again, 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 say 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 do during communion.

This time of year, I, like many others, have a tendency to get down. After enjoying all the wonderful music, food, lights, and decorations of Christmas, it eventually comes to an end. The eggnog and cookies are gone, we stop singing carols, and the lights are put away, it just seems like cold, gray, winter. This year has been particularly hard on all of us. It feels like a dark time. But as the wizard Dumbledore says in the Harry Potter books, "Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light." Maybe we need to leave some lights up for a while longer to keep away the darkness of winter. There's an English tradition of keeping Christmas decorations up until February 2, a day called Candlemas, 40 days after Christmas. Presbyterians don't really observe the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but if you want an excuse to keep your lights (and tree?) up, there it is. We can also remember that we just started the season of Epiphany, which is a time of light and celebration following the birth of Christ. So, I guess you could keep on celebrating until Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday). Whatever cheers you up, do it.

When the twelve days of Christmas have passed, there's something else that comes to my mind each year. Let this be our charge in the days ahead:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

Howard Thurman (1899-1981) African American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader.

Soli Deo Gloria (to God alone be the glory),

John