

Christmas 2 January 3, 2021

As you most likely know if you have heard my sermons over the past six weeks or so, I have been very interested in the monoliths that have started showing up in various sites around the world. The first one was spotted in the remote canyon lands of Utah by some state biologists observing bighorn sheep. No one knew how this metal monolith had suddenly appeared, “in the middle of nowhere,” as one of the biologists characterized it, and who was responsible for it. After about a week it was carted off in the dead of night by persons unknown, but news of this monolith spurred other monoliths, over 100 or so all around the world. On the morning of December 12th, a hiker down in Pittsfield came across a monolith in our Green Mountain State. Yes, there is a Vermont monolith! So of course, New Year’s Day, Elizabeth and Zadie and I drove to Pittsfield and walked up to see it, and this is what we saw:



Yes, I know, monoliths are so last year, so 2020, but still I thought going to see this one was a good thing to do to start out a new year.

Prayer: Most merciful God, as we come together in prayer in this new year, may your Word come to us in a new way as well, that we might renew our faith in your love and serve in the Name of the Risen Christ; this we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

We heard what I admit is a rather strange musical selection this morning, “Auld lang syne” sung by a choir made up of African Americans from Birmingham, AL, singing a ballad originally penned by Robert Burns and set to an old Scottish folk tune. While not a specifically Christian anthem, I thought that it was instructive nevertheless for our service this morning. We just celebrated the coming of the New Year a few days ago. The young director of the film we saw, Tyler Jones, the person who developed this project, however, wondered if we might be too quick this year to flee all the death, division and depression of 2020 to move as quickly as possible into the new future. But “Auld lang syne,” questions this human tendency to rush off into the future and forget the past, asking, “Should old acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind?” In a year like we have just come through, with a once

in a lifetime pandemic which has caused so much death and illness on an unheard of scale for the modern world, and then with its attendant economic chaos, many people out of work, whole industries, such as restaurants and airlines, now on the verge of collapse, and finally, with this pandemic exposing all the greatest inequalities of our society, from the tremendous racial disparities to the inequalities and growing wealth gap in our society, all these social ills on top of the coronavirus pandemic seem to make this past year very much a time to forget.

But that tendency that very human trait to quickly forget the past, especially if it is traumatic and difficult, I am not sure that it serves us well in this instance. As difficult as the past year has been, it taught us some lesson about the ways in which we can move forward faithfully and ways in which we fail to follow Jesus. But at another level, I believe that it is by acknowledging what has happened, what our recent experiences were and how they effected us, that we are then freed to move forward in ways in which we can grow and serve God in a much more faithful fashion. As the philosopher George Santayana has famously said, “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” During this past year we have seen how deeply the wounds of racist actions still effect our society. We have seen the pain and awful truth of racial disparities in our nation. We have also seen the attempts to overcome these racial injustices in both ways symbolic, such as the removal of monuments to the Confederacy and in ways that been to address the systemic racism embedded in our institutions as well. I believe that this is a case of not forgetting the past, but attempting to confront the past that we might overcome it the injustices and inequalities we have inherited and make our world more inclusive and caring for all God’s people.

I believe that this is particularly important for us as Christians. As those called to follow Jesus, as those who have been loved fully and completely by God, we have a particular duty to remember what has occurred in times gone by and ensure that we act faithfully in the future on the basis of that knowledge. Today, on this second Sunday after Christmas, we heard the story of the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, when Jospheh and Mary were forced to become refugees, fleeing a tyrannical ruler in order to preserve their very lives. Jospheh, just like his namesake in the Book of Genesis, Jospheh is a dreamer and God speaks to Jospheh through these dreams. Joseph is warned of Herod’s homicidal plot to kill the child, and so he escapes with Mary and the child. What the lesson this morning skips over, however, is that Herod’s bloodthirstiness is seemingly insatiable, he is a murderer, and so just to make sure he takes cares of any threats to his rule, he kills all the boy babies two years old and younger. This is a horrible thing to remember, and no wonder the lesson appointed this morning skips over this terrible incident. But this lesson, and

especially this terrible story of the massacre of the innocents, this shows us the depth of the evil we face in this world. Just like the year the we have come through, with the death and destruction of the coronavirus all too prevalent in the background of our everyday interactions, we must be aware of what we face.

At the same time, it is through a radical confrontation with the depth of evil that we are able to appreciate the power of love which lifts us up. Just as Jospheh is told again in a dream that he can return to the people of Israel, that he can come back to his home country and that he can rejoin his people, this is a powerful metaphor, I believe for us. A terrible evil has happened. There is no way to undo it. But acknowledging that evil, seeing the pain in its draw depth, this makes it possible for us to move ahead, like Jospheh, with eyes open to the danger, but also with our eyes of faith open to God's saving providence, a love and promise to be present with us even in the midst of the most difficult times. The story of Jesus in the Christmas season is the story of God with us, Emmanuel, God present with you and with me. In that presence, God with us means that even in the midst of danger, we are not alone. As we look back on this past year recently gone, we know that it is the isolation which has been one of the most difficult aspects of facing this pandemic. We can come together like this, online and virtually, or come together over the phone. We might even see each other once in a while at a distance, but keeping our physical distancing in order to keep control of the spread of the virus is still very important. So we have not been able to gather as we are accustomed: we were not able to be together on Easter or at Christmas, but as we took care of each other by maintaining physical distance, as we took care by gathering online, still God is with us: jut as we have proclaimed this Christmas season, just as we have sung out along with the angel choirs, God's presence with us, in times past and still with us here in our day, this is our hope and our promise.

So we begin this new year of 2021 with the hope it rightfully brings to us: looking forward in faith, faith tested in the depth of the difficult times we have faced, especially in the last year during the pandemic, looking forward in faith even in the midst of the difficulties we still confront as the pandemic has not yet ru its course. But through all this, God is with us, sharing our humanity that the divine hope of a love supreme will continue to inspiring us in our life together. Just as Jeremiah saw in his day, in the midst of Israel's exile, our hope too rests in God who will restore and redeem us. As we continue this celebration of God with us, the savior Jesus come into our world we are comforted. We do not forget the past year, but rather, just like the choir sang, we will share a cup of kindness as we face the future in hope, looking for God's love in Christ come into our world. This is the spirit of wisdom the apostle Paul calls forth, that the eyes of our hearts may be

enlightened to know the hope to which the Lord Jesus Christ calls us. Living in this hope, surrounded by this amazing grace, the new year will be a time when we once again know the presence of God with us, Jesus leading the way for us to live according to his loving kindness and peace for our lives and for our world. Thanks be to God for this great game and thanks be to Christ for coming to us, sharing his life with us that we might share this divine love with others. Amen.