

“Silent Night?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
December 31, 2023 - First Sunday after Christmas

[Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:22-40](#)

Please join me in prayer. “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen (William Sloan Coffin).”

Happy New Year’s Eve! We made it to this last day of 2023, which is a day for both reflection and expectation as we consider the events of the last year and how these have shaped our lives and look forward to the coming year and also wonder what lies in store for us and our world in the year ahead.

As the year turns, some of us will celebrate joyfully and loudly tonight with friends and family. Others of us will have a more silent night or will not celebrate at all. However it is that you will be experiencing the ending of one year and the beginning of a new one, I hope that you will do so recognizing God’s gracious provision for you today and all the days before this, and that you are hopeful for more of God’s blessings to be with you in the year ahead.

In so doing, you would echo the words of our first reading from Isaiah, a passage from the part of the book known as Third Isaiah, which was written after the descendants of those taken into captivity into Babylon were released as Babylon was replaced by Persia as the ruling Empire in the Near East, and many of the children of Israel had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its temple, which had been in ruins. With hopeful expectation for what would be built in this new day, the writer exclaims, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God” (Isa. 61:10).

A similar song of joyful praise and expectation for a rebuilt world was offered by characters in our second reading from the gospel of Luke, which tells the story of the presentation of baby Jesus in the then-rebuilt temple in then-rebuilt Jerusalem. We heard that Mary and Joseph took their 40-day-old child, to the temple in Jerusalem, so that they could offer a sacrifice as required in the Torah, which instructed parents to offer after the birth of a child a lamb, or two turtledoves or pigeons for those who could not afford a lamb. Jesus’ parents

were poor and so they offered birds at the temple, when coming to them there were two God-inspired people, the prophet Anna and a man named Simeon, both of whom recognized in Mary's child the special blessing of God, that he was the Messiah who would bring the blessing of saving light to Israel and the whole world.

Even the child's name, Jesus, points to his identity as one who will bring the blessing of salvation. The name, given by God's angel to Mary and Joseph to offer their son, was the common Hebrew name Yeshua, meaning "the Lord saves." It was the same name as one of Israel's greatest heroes, Joshua, the protégé of Moses who led the people out of the wilderness and into the land of promise. The expectation was that, like Joshua, Jesus would be a savior for people by leading them into place of promise and blessing.

As Simeon and Anna saw young Jesus in the temple, they rejoiced in seeing and celebrating Jesus as the saving Messiah or Christ. They lived at a time when the children of Israel were oppressed by the empire of Rome, and they had been longing for a Messiah, an anointed warrior, who would, like Joshua and King David, be a military conqueror and rid the land of its Roman overlords. And in Jesus, a decedent of David, the Messiah did come, but he would not conquer by violence, and would, in fact, have his life taken away by the Romans. Instead, Jesus would save by conquering death itself, with his triumph over the grave. Jesus still saves by setting people free from the ways of aimlessness and sin that cause so much harm. He is the Messiah who gives us hope for new days and new years filled with newness, ones in which we can expect more life and love to come to us and the world around us in unexpected new ways.

So, this morning, wherever you are at in your life, whether you are experiencing joy and happiness; are sorrowful or grieving; are hope-filled or are feeling hopeless, know that God, who created you and loves you, is doing something new and wonderful in and around you.

Let us ever give thanks to God for the gift of newness. Let us be like Anna and Simeon in lifting up our voices in joyous praise at the coming of a savior. Let us sing out with the angelic host a hymn of celebration for heaven-born Prince of peace and Sun of righteousness has dwelled among us. If 70,000 Taylor Swift fans (aka Swifties), gathered together for a concert, can make the earth shake, as they

did this summer in Seattle, causing seismic activity the equivalent of a magnitude 2.3 earthquake as they sang and shook to her songs like “Shake It Off,” shouldn’t the 2.3 billion followers of Jesus be able to shake the whole planet with our shouts of joy and song of praise that a savior has been born for all the world’s people to bring them redeeming grace? Let’s do our part, on this not-so-silent night, to make some joyful noise and to shake the world into becoming more of the new world, full of justice and peace and love and light, that God desires for it be for all of us. Amen.