

I AM WILLING (HOLLY NEAR)

There is hurting in my family
And there is sorrow in my town.
There is panic all across the nation
And there is wailing the whole world round.

May the children see more clearly
And may the elders be more wise.
May the winds of change caress us
Even though they burn our eyes.

REFRAIN:

I am open and I am willing
for to be hopeless would seem so strange.
It dishonors those who go before us,
so lift me up to the light of change.

Give me a mighty oak to hold my confusion
And give me a desert to hold my fears.
Give me a sunset to hold my wonder
And give me an ocean to hold my tears.

San Francisco / December 2023

Dear Friends:

Last Friday night I made my annual pilgrimage to Davies Symphony Hall, here in San Francisco, for a performance of Handel's MESSIAH. It was a good one. The orchestra, the solo singers and especially the chorus were beyond praise. When it came time to stand for the Hallelujah Chorus (an old tradition) most of the people around me were tearful. Me too. Like any song lyric that you hear repeatedly over the years, and cherish, the words can go through your ears and directly to your heart, but it's not always the same words that trigger that reaction. This year, with the sinful Russian war continuing in Ukraine, and during the dreadful violence escalating in the Holy Land, my soul got stirred with new emotion by "Why do the nations rage so furiously together?" And in a week that saw the deaths of one of our worship circle at Sophia in Trinity (Roman Catholic Women Priests) and the spouse of another, I inevitably was heart stricken by "A trumpet shall sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible, BE RAISED INCORRUPTIBLE." Maybe it's my 80 year old body parts starting to rust and resist, or my realization earlier this year that I had outlived my father and both of my brothers, but that lyric really slammed me. Imagine! A new world without Breast Cancer, Parkinson's, Cellulitis, Diabetes and Alzheimer's! Where aging would only mean deeper wisdom and greater delight in the blessings of life!

Well, to go from the sublime to the ridiculous, last Saturday, the day after Handel,

was SantaCon. A December tradition that didn't start here, but that has certainly flourished here. Thousands of young adults dress in Santa gear, if only a touselled cap. They gather at Union Square, where they drop off toys for the SF Fire Dept's collection and then go off in various directions for an all-day pub crawl throughout the city. I was on my to Trader Joe's in the late afternoon and encountered hundreds of them, collapsing in Washington Square, laughing and celebrating. Good extrovert that I am, I quickly appropriated their tawdry silliness and joy. Fun and delight, even for an 80 year old recovering alcoholic.

When I got home with my groceries, I found a voicemail from one of the grieving spouses from our church group. She was looking for the lyrics to one of our favorite songs we sometimes share at our liturgies. It's the Holly Near text on the previous page, which has become one of my most cherished songs. I love the line in the refrain that says "to be hopeless would seem so strange – it dishonors those who go before us." Isn't that a powerful thought? That our ancestors, who had so many reasons to feel hopeless, nevertheless persisted and that we somehow insult their memory when we too easily give way to disappointment and despair.

I think of my mom. Chicago Irish. In her first five years of marriage she endured two miscarriages and two stillbirths. But she and my dad were determined, in spite of advice to throw in the towel. They made a novena at Our Lady of Sorrows on the west side and proceeded, over the next nine years, to produce Marykay, David, me and Daniel. (And if you would dare question how the mother of Jesus could have had anything to do with that change in fortune, you'd be in for some genuine Chicago Irish disdain.)

My dad's grandfather and great uncle were Tennesseans who fought on the side of the Union in the Civil War and were *persona non grata* afterwards. They emigrated to a farm in western Missouri. My dad grew up there. Didn't quite graduate from grammar school, skipped high school altogether to work at the local movie theater, where he sold the tickets, made the popcorn and ran the projector. Eventually he lied about his age to get a job working on the railroad between St. Louis and Chicago. At some point he got off the train in the Windy City and stayed there. Got a job in the new business of dry cleaning. Thrived. Met Katherine Hickey (see story above). His cleaning establishment, by the way, became my brother Dan's business. Now it's run by Dan's stepson. And for several years it's been celebrated as one of the best six cleaners in the home of the Cubs, Bears, Blackhawks and various other loveable losers.

So, "be hopeless and dishonor those who go before us"? Not this December. As a poet recently wrote, "I no longer pray for peace. I pray for miracles."

May you have a blessed Christmas and a miraculous new year!
Lots of love from the City of Saint Francis.