

*I Believe in Love: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*  
*Second Sunday in Advent – December 6, 2020*

Throughout the ages, people have gathered during the long nights of winter to tell stories of death and rebirth. They may be stories of bravery called out from unexpected people, of a quest fulfilled after long hardship, or of ghosts returning from the dead to offer a message of new life. So though we are gathered in daylight, I have a seasonal ghost story for you this morning.

25 years ago I served as the interim minister of the First Church Unitarian in Lancaster, MA. One of my predecessors there was Edmund Hamilton Sears, whom we now mainly remember as the author of the Christmas hymn, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*. So on Christmas Eve it was the church's tradition to hold a late-night service ending at midnight with the singing of Sears' hymn as the steeple bell rang out the good news of Christmas morning. One year, long before I was there, on a Christmas Eve in one of the long years of the Vietnam War, a guest organist was playing for the service. He knew nothing about the church's connection with Sears, just that he was to play that hymn at the end of the service. And he played it magnificently. The music held the words with power and passion, carrying the congregation to sing the words with deeper feeling than ever before. After the service, the man who told me this story complimented the organist on his playing and told him how it made him feel. "You know," the organist replied, "it felt like someone else was there moving my hands. I didn't feel like I was the one playing that hymn. I felt like someone else was playing it through me." Sears, they concluded, was there that Christmas Eve.

So why might Sears' ghost have returned to play his hymn? Let me tell you a little about how that hymn came to be written. Today, we only remember him as the writer of that hymn, but in his own day he was recognized as a prominent theologian, poet, and lyricist. He began his ministry in 1838 at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts. He was drawn, he wrote, by "the quiet beauty of Wayland with its sylvan life and little parish." But Sears and his wife Ellen had a growing family. The church in Wayland couldn't pay enough to support them. So when the pulpit committee of the much larger and wealthier church in Lancaster reached out to this rising star of a minister to see if he would come to them, he sadly resigned from his ministry in Wayland and moved his family to Lancaster in 1840. The Lancaster church, with its big brick sanctuary designed by Charles Bulfinch, served a growing area of farms and milltowns. Sears found that he was kept so busy serving this larger parish that he had little time to distill his thoughts and emotions into essays or poetry. And he had a lot of emotion he needed to process - in addition to all the individual sorrow and suffering he was privy to through his pastoral care, he was a strong abolitionist and a pacifist. The US's invasion of Mexico to annex Texas and the thousands wrongly - he felt - left dead, weighed upon him as did his increasing hopelessness of freeing the slaves without a war. He became so depressed he could not function, and in 1847 he resigned from the church in Lancaster.

I don't know anything about his time sitting with his grief and his fears. The biographical materials only tell us that in 1848 he was well enough to begin preaching again in Wayland, where his family had moved and that in 1849 he wrote *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*. But the power of that hymn shows us that he was opened by his time of suffering to a greater depth of love than before. Unlike an earlier Christmas hymn he had written which also has angels

singing over the plains, this one mourns that “man, at war with man, hears not the love song which they bring.” Like Longfellow hearing the bells on Christmas Day, Sears knows that there are no easy answers, that a love song is not a sweet message but a call to action and embodiment. In a verse which isn’t usually sung anymore he reaches out to all who, like him, know pain in body, mind, and spirit:

*And ye, beneath life’s crushing load  
Whose forms are bending low,  
Who toil along the climbing way,  
With painful steps and slow, -  
Look now: for glad and golden hours  
Come swiftly on the wing:  
O rest beside the weary road  
And hear the angels sing!*

He invites us - for who among us hasn’t struggled under a crushing load? - he invites us to rest, to reflect, to engage with our feelings, rather than struggle against them, and so to come through to that dark open plain of the spirit where we can see that the sky around us is filled with angels, with good news that we are not alone, that our struggle is not for nothing even if we do not achieve it.

So many of the wise ones we look to in our journeys have walked this way before us. Today many Buddhists celebrate Bodhi Day, when tradition holds the Buddha achieved Enlightenment. Though we often picture him sitting alone under the Bo Tree, his journey began with his engaging with the sorrows of the world, not looking away or trying to protect himself.

This is the message of all religious paths - that life is suffering as the Buddha realized, and it's how we engage with that suffering which makes the difference. Do we try to close ourselves off from it, as Sears found himself doing during those first years in Lancaster? Or do we let ourselves be broken open by it and so find our broken places filled with love?

So why might Sears’ ghost have returned to play his hymn during the Vietnam War? For the same reason he might return this year. We have been broken open by so much suffering in our nation and in the world in recent years. The charge which comes to us this Christmas is to hold onto what we have learned about the world and ourselves, that it may flow out in love, as the music played from that organist on Christmas Eve, turning Sears’ sorrow into hope and love, signs, as Anne Porter wrote of “the longed-for beauty” of that “radiant meadow” where all shall find a home.

- Pamela M. Barz