

Dear Family and Friends:

Aw-w-w childhood. I can remember when calling a set of circumstances to be the case, with the added proviso “no change-ees,” could render that a virtual reality for a fleeting moment. You could call yourself Bob Hayes, the fastest human in the world at the time, and adding “no change-ees” meant that the guys in the neighborhood had to stay one step behind you in the next sprint. We all aimed to be the quickest “no change-ees” call in the neighborhood.

This year's pilgrimage looked quite different than that, didn't it? We have experienced seismic shifts in the patterns of our lives. We have lived through an era that we would never have imagined and a quick “no change-ees” call would be most inappropriate. It has been a year of virtual reality with its social isolation, medical uncertainty and fear, a brooding anxiety so regularly underlined in the media, economic dislocation, and the plain weirdness of the “new normal”.

This COVID season has prompted RV's return to patterns of yesteryear—walks at sunrise and/or sunset. They have proven to be real-life stabilizers that have helped him sort things out in an otherwise crazy journey. A time to greet passing neighbors, to think, and to pray. Patterned prayers frequently rescue him from wandering, worrying, wearying thoughts, what early Christians called *logismoi*. At sunrise—

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.  
His purposes will ripen fast  
Unfolding every hour  
The bud may have a bitter taste  
But sweet will be the flower

And in the evening—

Save us from troubled, restless sleep  
From all ill dreams your children keep  
So calm our minds that fears may cease  
And rested bodies wake in peace.

A recurring theme has emerged from his ambling through the neighborhood. This unique period is a time to slow down and to center down on what really matters; a time to render up to him a thankful and hopeful heart. But what does that look like, really? Am I to be thankful and hopeful—

- For the death of a kind, loving, wonderful father;
- For a weird season of isolation and fear;
- In missed family gatherings in Rhode Island, Buffalo, and Austria;
- In the sometimes awkward, stumbling, virtual management of the office?

The Scripture tells us to give thanks in all things. How can we thank Him for things that turn our lives upside down? We have been through unsettling, unremitting, trying circumstances. Our natural cry is—stop this! Fix this! Bless us ... and step on it! I do not naturally thank Him for my trials, afflictions, or disappointments; for things that exasperate or frustrate me. Yet when I look over my life's journey, it is

frequently in these fitful times that I have learned my richest lessons.

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We will not be able to attend a late evening service this Christmas. We can and will join our congregation there virtually. Wonder will be there, a sacred ambiance of scent, sight, and sound. The church emblazoned with hope and reaffirmed in its faith.

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee ...

The choir processes, their voices in unison, filling the sanctuary, piercing the evening calm, blessing the Lord of Hosts, and praising his name. To my weary and worry-prone soul comes a new energy that circles through my place in the virtual balcony like a blessed current—

Unto us a child is born, unto us a Savior is given ...

New vigor to replace the old; new life to energize the journey that too often disappoints me and lures me into patterns that forget my blessings, weighing me down. My heart feels its barnacles falling away—

O come let us adore Him ...

The service ends in the flickering shadows of candlelight and lost in the musical and lyrical wonder of Silent Night—

Silent night, holy night  
All is calm, all is bright

...

Jesus, Lord at Thy birth  
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth.

He is the stabilizer, the center that holds, the Sovereign majesty to which all reality trends. Let us greet our Lord this season with thankful and hopeful hearts. We wish you and yours a joyous Christmas and a blessed and happy New Year.