

ROMANIAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE

Eparchy of St. George in Canton



Office of the Bishop

In the Bleak Midwinter – Christmas Message 2020

This year has been one unlike any other in our memory. The religious, political and social divisions that have plagued humanity for ages seem to have been multiplied many times over in our day by the coronavirus, a new and global plague that we now face. COVID-19 has taken away from us the safety of what is most familiar at this time of year—family gatherings, Christmas shopping, churches full of worshippers, caroling from home to home—and threatens to stress us to our breaking point and beyond.

As if Christmas weren't stressful enough even in the best of times!

How in the world are we to celebrate the season when all around us every day are reminders of our weakness, our brokenness, and even our mortality?

In the Bleak Midwinter is an 1872 Christmas carol by English poet Christina Rossetti. It was famously set to music by Gustav Holst at the beginning of the twentieth century. While I cannot reproduce it here in its entirety, taking the lyrics and the music together, I find that this carol more than any other I know captures both the sadness and the exhaustion I feel this year, as well as the hope that sparkles like lights on a Christmas tree in the darkness.

"In the bleak mid-winter
Frosty wind made moan;
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter
Long ago.

"Our God, heaven cannot hold Him
Nor earth sustain,
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When He comes to reign:
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable-place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty —
Jesus Christ."

The One who came to us as a child two thousand and twenty years ago invites us in our turn to go to Him at this very moment. Not for nothing has the Source of all that is entered our history and taken on our flesh and our nature, weak as it is. It is for us, for our wellbeing, our flourishing, indeed our eternal life that God is born and comes to us as Jesus, son of Mary.

What that means is that at this very moment Jesus is waiting to welcome us into His human arms and His Divine and Sacred Heart. He yearns to give us comfort, joy, and rest. This is the Good News that we Christians are called to proclaim to a weary world. It is the warm and loving invitation to approach, to accept, to find our rest with a real human who is also truly God. *The amazing thing is that accepting His invitation is the greatest gift we can give Him—and ourselves, and one another—this Christmas.*

"What can I give Him,
Poor as I am? —
If I were a Shepherd
I would bring a lamb;

If I were a Wise Man
I would do my part, —
Yet what I can I give Him, —
Give my heart."

To give our hearts to the Christ-Child, to allow Him to make of them a manger in which to rest, is all the response to His invitation we need to offer for Him to enter into our exhaustion, our isolation, and our sorrow. He so wants to give us rest and peace from the troubles that assail us every moment. Jesus yearns to give us the companionship we need, to come to know Him intimately and to experience for ourselves the truth at the center of the universe: that Love is at the heart of it all, and that we are, ultimately and for all eternity, safe in the Divine Embrace.

May the one who comes to us in this bleak midwinter of our lives, who was born in a cave and laid in a manger, Christ our true God, be the source of new life for you and your loved ones. May He be all that and more for us in this season of our crying need.

+John Michael, Bishop
Eparchy of St. George in Canton for Romanians