

## **Come into My Heart**

*Delivered to the United Church of Acworth  
Acworth, New Hampshire  
On the occasion of the Ordination of Joel Arthur Eaton  
July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017*

**John 13:1-17; 33-35 | Isaiah 6:1-8 | Romans 1:8-12**

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Thursday.  
Twenty after five.  
New Haven, Connecticut.  
    A student closes her laptop...  
which sets off a chain reaction.  
Books pile into backpacks  
Here and there, fitful bursts of conversation.

Class is over.

Stand up...  
Stretch...  
    sigh...  
Its already dark, and there are miles to go before sleep  
    Miles to go before sleep.

\*

At six the black Camry turns off Willow street and swoops around the  
onramp onto I-91.  
    Headed north, into the night.  
The prophets of old had it good.  
    Moses was told to take off his shoes.  
    Samuel was called by name.  
    And Isaiah, he of unclean lips... purified with a live coal.  
    *A live coal!*  
*...one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal with a pair of tongs.*

How dramatic!  
 The hymn of tires on the highway.  
 An old Bon Jovi tune plays at low volume.  
*And he touched my mouth and said: "...your guilt has departed;  
 your sin is blotted out."*  
 God made it so clear to them... their calls were *physical* experiences...  
*Take off your shoes...*  
*A live coal!*  
 Click click click go the directionals.  
 And here we are again... driving north into the night.  
 This drive!  
 158 miles from Yale to parsonage on Hill Road.  
 How many, many times!  
 Hundreds of times?  
 Hundreds of times...  
 Has it been worth it?  
 All these years? All these miles...  
*Then the Lord said, "Whom shall I send?" And I said, "Here am I; send  
 me!"*  
 Oh, for that clarity!  
 Where is the live coal?  
 Or *when*...  
*When* was that live coal?

\*

Only four...  
 Four years old.  
 It was 1990.  
 The whole family was in the car...  
 And we were in South Africa.

It was like the opening passage of "*Cry, the Beloved Country...*"

*THERE IS A lovely road that runs from Ixopo into the hills.  
 These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely  
 beyond any singing of it.  
 The road climbs seven miles into them, to Carisbrooke; and from  
 there, if there is no mist, you look down on one of the fairest valleys of  
 Africa.*

*About you there is grass and bracken and you may hear the  
forlorn crying of the titihoya, one of the birds of the veld.*

*Below you is the valley of the Umzimkulu, on its journey from  
the Drakensberg to the sea; and beyond and behind the river, great  
hill after great hill;*

*and beyond and behind them, the mountains of Ingeli and East  
Griqualand.*

Here, it was, in the heat of the day, on that lovely road that runs from  
Ixtopo, that mother taught us to sing...

*"Come into My Heart, Lord Jesus"*

Only four years old...

The grass covered hills.

The heat of the day.

In the backseat with an older brother, an older sister...

*Clarity!*

I remember... It was *physical!*

God said: *Take off your shoes...*

God called us by name, and we responded, singing...

*"Come into my heart, Lord Jesus"*

*"Come into my heart"*

\*

Six-forty.

The lights of Hartford shimmer on the horizon ahead.

There's something about the highway:

The headlong motion;

There's something about red-tail-lights coursing through the veins of  
the eastern seaboard...

something about the radial hymn of the tires—  
there's something about the highway.

At every instant, life and death sits casually at that resolute  
intersection of hand and steering wheel.

And here, in this place that is neither here nor there... it's easy to  
forget...

Origin and destination evaporate in the intoxication of speed.

70 miles-an-hour is a kind of ecstasy.

How did we end up on this SUV-smartphone-realityTV-presidential-twitter highway?

How do we get off?

How do we even slow down?

And where, in all this, is the live coal?

It could not be more clear!

Wherever it is, it is elsewhere...

*This* life of hurtling asphalt is surely nothing more than smoke and mirrors.

Worse than that...

It's not an illusion – because we made it.

We did it to ourselves. We *created* a culture that is appallingly self-obsessed – a society of people who dutifully follow the doctrine of personal comfort – who gather to worship at the *Bed Bath and Beyond* – who *believe* that material wealth is the ultimate goal of human life.

This is the sin that Martin Luther, and Saint Augustine before him, called *incurvatus in se*: the human soul's tendency to curve in upon itself, making itself holy, ignoring the divine. Focusing on the limited, And forgetting the ultimate.

Hartford's brief skyline leans over the highway as if to reiterate the point:

all is vapor.

And as suddenly as it appeared, Hartford is gone... replaced by the billboards that haunt the night.

There is nothing new under the sun.

\*

Bradley Airport.

The Massachusetts line.

Springfield.

The landmarks are hardly noticeable anymore, they are so familiar.

North of Holyoke, traffic becomes sparse.

The hills hunch up on either side of the highway, the naked trees of late winter revealing, here and there, a rock outcropping profiled against the sky.

It's a straight shot now – though still a long way.

7:20.

John Henry's getting cranky right about now.  
 Rachelle has built a fire and is nursing him...  
 An old Dylan album is playing,  
 And the Wilco is curled up on the couch...

We are, of course, *all* guilty of being *curved in* on ourselves.

Can one *curved-in* person help *uncurve* others?

It's a good question.

How does a fish teach another fish about the air, when both only know water?

The first step is simply to acknowledge that there is something else.

Curved-in, we imagine that we are complete.

But we are not.

Ministry is nothing more or less than helping others come to this simple yet crucial realization –

There is something beyond – something besides us.

And that something – Jesus teaches us – is good.

And so we uncurve...

We open.

Does the blossom understand the sun?

No.

And yet it opens its petals to the sky.

*"Come into my heart, Lord Jesus"*

\*

Vermont exit 7

Cross the river and we're back in the Granite state.

Left on Fling Road -- skirt the edge of Charlestown, and onto the backroad to Acworth

Acworth...

You don't get there unless you're going there.

The road winds through the dark hills...

Opens up under the moon where Luther Hill Road comes in from the south...

It has taken a long time

A long time to get here.

On that afternoon, a quarter of a century ago, when mother taught us to sing

With the low scrub of the veld passing outside the car.

From that time, when we sang "*Come into my heart Lord Jesus*"

It has been a long journey

A journey from certainty, to doubt, to faith.

A journey from the heart, to the intellect...

And back, now, to the heart...

Back, now, to Jesus.

At the end, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus asked for our hearts.

Even though he knew he was about to be betrayed, he gathered a basin of water and insisted, despite Peter's vocal objections, on washing the feet of his disciples.

And after this servile act...

After master became servant

Christ – the messiah – gave us a new commandment:

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

This, then, is how we *uncurve*.

Loving one another, we practice the art of discovering...

Discovering *that something*...

*That something* beyond us –

Something of ultimate value...

The sacred.

The divine.

Love is our practice.

And the minister is but our humble guide.

At 8:45 pm the black Camry shudders to a stop in the driveway of the parsonage on Hill Rd.

Joel Arthur Eaton collects his bag and gets out.

Early May, it's still cold in Acworth...

Almost sugaring time.

Inside, an old Dylan tune is playing...

And young John Henry is asleep in Rachelle's arms.

"May I?" Joel asks

She smiles, uncurving as she stands and passes the child to his father.

Love is our practice

And Joel...

A man filled with abundant love...

Humbly guides us back...

Back to Jesus.

What a great joy it is to welcome him to the ministry of Jesus!

Let the whole congregation say...

Amen.