

# The Vineyard

*A publication to encourage and motivate participation in the family of God  
and an aid in ministry for the members of Myerstown United Church of Christ.*



December 2023

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*From the Pastor*

## *“The Hopes and Fears of All the Years”*

Christmas carols admittedly sentimentalize Christmas far beyond historical reality. The grit and grind of the first Christmas are overwhelmed by poetic license – as if birth in a smelly barn is somehow lovely; as if birth is angelically free of anxiety and pain; as if giving birth in a strange town and being at the mercy of complete strangers always works out.

Yet, in between lines too sweet to swallow and concepts too hard to understand, we find brilliant lyrics worthy of our time and reflection. Take time this Advent and Christmas to read the lyrics of carols and you will see what I mean. There are brilliant lyrics to be found. Consider these lines from “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

After visiting the Palestinian city of Bethlehem in 1865, Episcopal priest Phillips Brooks was inspired to write these lyrics. And what was happening in 1865? The American Civil war was ending, exacting a cost of one million lives. On Good Friday of that year, President Lincoln was assassinated. Our nation was deeply divided and faced daunting challenges, much like today.

Ponder these words again. Our hopes and fears co-mingle on the eve of the Northern Hemisphere’s longest night. There is much to fear and grieve. Conflicts, calamities, and tragedies weigh heavily on us, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not to mention our own personal challenges. We carry all of it into this long, dark season, stringing lights and lighting candles to fend off the darkness.

Yet, hope shines in the darkness whenever we rise to our God-given potential. At our best, we break down barriers and boundaries. Our courage brings justice and peace. Our compassion brings healing and hope. Our inventions cure diseases and solve problems. Our art and music express the cries and joys of the heart. Our collaboration fosters unity. Hope still shines!

Even in the darkest places and times, “the everlasting Light” shines as our hopes and fears co-mingle each year. That is why we light our candles and lights, sing the songs of the season, and celebrate in a multitude of ways the power of light over darkness. Thus, hope overcomes despair, peace overcomes war, joy overcomes grief, and love overcomes hatred.

People of good will everywhere, people of all ages and every persuasion, people of all faiths and no faith, join hands to celebrate the “everlasting Light” that lives in all of us. As the hopes and fears of all the years meet in us, and as the tensions within and among us continue, our undeniable potential still generates a constant hope that no darkness will ever overcome us.

Blessings to all in this sacred season! + *Bruce Greer, Interim Pastor*

(please see next page)

**A Pastoral Postscript** – *Thank you all* for your worship attendance in November, especially in preparation for our open forum on November 12<sup>th</sup> and for the Annual Meeting on November 19<sup>th</sup>. We discussed significant issues related to our future, including the sale of our property. At the Annual Meeting, after a straw poll majority (33 of 48) supported authorizing Council to proceed with professional consultations regarding the sale of our property, a formal motion to proceed was made and approved overwhelmingly by a show of hands, with no voiced objections or negative votes. All the while, our discussions were civil, fact-based, and thoughtful! *For that I am deeply grateful! Thank you!*  
+ Bruce



### **FROM THE PULPIT** **IN DECEMBER 2023**

(The primary sermon text is underlined.)

#### **ADVENT 1 – DECEMBER 3<sup>rd</sup>** **(The Candle of Hope)**

***“Keep Awake!”***

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80;  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

#### **ADVENT 2 – DECEMBER 10<sup>th</sup>** **(The Candle of Peace)**

***“Prepare the Way!”***

Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85;  
2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

#### **ADVENT 3 – DECEMBER 17<sup>th</sup>** **(The Candle of Joy)**

***“Sent with Good News”***

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126;  
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

#### **ADVENT 4 – DECEMBER 24<sup>th</sup>** **(The Candle of Love)**

***“The Magnificence of Mary”***

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55 (psalm of the day);  
Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

**CHRISTMAS EVE – DECEMBER 24 (4:30 PM)**  
***A Candle Light Service of Lessons and Carols***  
Readings from Isaiah; Matthew, Luke, and John

#### **CHRISTMAS 1 – DECEMBER 31<sup>st</sup>** **(The Christ Candle)**

***“They Returned to Galilee”***

Isaiah 61:10—62:3; Psalm 148;  
Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

## **Important Dates December 2023!**

**Monday, December 4** -Myerstown Women’s Club  
7:00 pm in social hall

**Wednesday, December 6**—Troop 20 meeting 6:30 pm  
in social hall

**Tuesday, December 12**—Council meeting at 6:30 pm  
in the Library.

**Wednesday, December 13**—Troop 20 meeting 6:30 pm  
in social hall

**Sunday, December 17**—We will have **Conversational immediately following worship. If you’d like, please bring cookies to share!**

**Wednesday, December 20**—Troop 20 meeting 6:30 pm  
in social hall

**\*Thursday, December 28**—Troop 20 meeting 6:30 pm  
In social hall

**The office will be closed from Monday, December 25<sup>th</sup> thru Monday, January 1<sup>st</sup>. You may still reach us through voicemail or email, both are checked daily.**

**You may pick up your poinsettias after either the 9:00 am or 4:30 pm service on December 24<sup>th</sup>, or see Marcia Bicher to make other arrangements.**



If you would like to contribute to a Christmas gift for Pastor Greer, please give your donation to Lindy Bennetch or the church office **BEFORE** Friday, December 15<sup>th</sup>. Thank you!





*Happy Birthday!*

## DECEMBER

2—Teresa Wolfe

4—Jared Rosen

5—William Brown

7—Gavin Bicher

8—Ted Batdorff

Brian Gibbel

15—Doug Bohannon

16—Joyce Mitstifer

19—Mary Beth Diehm

20—Travis Bicher

21—Marsha Eisenhauer

25—Richard 'Fritz' Firestine

28—Kara Frantz

29—Gia Zimmerman



**\*\*We neglected to publish Ruthann Snoke's birthday in November. Her birthday is November 17th.**

**Happy Birthday Ruthann!**

## December's Outreach

### Christmas Fund for Veterans of the Cross

This is a fund that has been caring for active and retired clergy and lay employees of the United Church of Christ for over 100 years. The fund provides emergency grants, supplementation of small annuities and health premiums and Christmas "Thank You" gift checks each December to lower-income retirees. UCC congregations and members have blessed this fund with their generosity for many years. This is an opportunity for Myerstown UCC to reach out to those servants of the church who are facing a time of need. Many of these servants of the past receive small pensions and are grateful for assistance from their denomination, knowing they have not been forgotten. Please consider a gift of any size. Your donation can be placed in the offering plate with Christmas Fund noted on your envelope. You also can donate on line by going to the UCC web site. Let us be thankful for these many servants of our God.

*Thank you! Carolyn*



### HELP US CELEBRATE TED BATDORFF'S 90TH BIRTHDAY!

Ted Batdorff is turning 90 on December 8. We will be having a 'drop-in' at our house for him on December 9 from 3:00 pm—6:00 pm.

Our address is

336 Tree View Lane, Lebanon, PA 17042

We hope that you can help us celebrate 90 years of Ted!

Thanks,  
Suzi and Bill Upton





## Julius Muthengi Update

Dear Ministry partners,

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I trust this communication finds you well. Agnes and I together with our family are doing well, as we are being sheltered by the grace of God. It is always a privilege for us to have friends like you who are standing with us in advancing the kingdom of God in Africa and the world. Indeed, your role in our lives and ministry have significant implications, and only God who knows it all.

God has continued to bless his ministry through us, both at the university and also among our village community. On Saturday, November 18th 2023, our university marked its 38th graduation celebration. We praise God for enabling us to train leaders of integrity to spearhead holistic transformation in the Church, and society. Please pray for the men and women who completed their training, as they find their niche in fulfilling the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has continued to bless his work through Agnes as she ministers to the women in our village. As you are aware, she not only preaches God's word to the women, but she also feeds them as well as giving them food to take home! The end of the year meeting will be on Friday, November 25th, 2023.

As you pray for us, please remember two families of our university who lost their loved ones in October and November this year. One of my colleagues lost his dear wife who was also a faculty member at International Leadership University. We also lost a prospective graduate, who graduated posthumously last Saturday. Please pray also for our family members, especially our son and daughter who need jobs. Keep praying for God's provision of funds towards maintenance of our well/borehole, as well as funds to enable us to provide solar lamps to our village community. We also need prayers for additional financial support as we serve God. We wish you God's blessings as you celebrate Thanksgiving Holiday. We also wish you a Merry Christmas and a blessed new year, 2024!

Thank you for being there for us. . . God bless you beloved.

Your friends in Christ,  
Julius & Agnes

Dear Ministry Partners,

Greetings in the matchless name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I trust God is upholding you as you celebrate Thanksgiving Holiday, and beyond! As always, Agnes and I are grateful to God for the ministry he has graciously entrusted to us. We praise him too for giving us friends/partners like you as we serve him here in Kenya. . . As I indicated in the recent e-mail, Agnes had a great meeting with ladies for a good number of hours... She shared God's word, provided lunch with the women, and also gave them packets of wheat flour to take home! We thank God for his provision through which he uses us to bless others! Attached please see a few photos of the jubilant women as they sang songs of praise to the King of kings and Lord of lords. May God bless you immensely for being his faithful servants.



In Christ,  
Agnes and Julius



A **big THANK YOU** to our scouts of Troop 20 for cleaning up leaves on the church property! They are always busy serving others; from collecting non perishables for the food drive in November to help keep the local food pantries stocked for the holi-

days, to cleaning up debris in the Spring at Mt. Hope Cemetery; putting up flags in the local cemeteries and the display at the VFW.



**'Do a good turn daily'**

## Music to My Ears...

### How "O Holy Night" Became a Popular Christmas Carol

"O Holy Night," crafted by Adolphe Adam, is one of the most revered Christmas carols around. It was composed in 1847 of "Minuit, chrétiens," a French poem crafted by poet and wine merchant Placide Cappeau.

**Origin** The carol has multiple versions, the original French and the English variations being the most predominant. The text of the original poem offers connotations of the birth of "Jesus," and the subsequent redemption of humanity. The genesis of "Minuit, chrétiens" can be dated back to the end of 1843. In that year, the church organ at Roquemaure of southern France had experienced a renovation, which subsequently led to celebrations. On the said occasion, the parish priest successfully coaxed Placide Cappeau, the local poet and wine merchant, to craft a poem for Christmas. In the same year, Adolphe Adam crafted its accompanying music. In 1847, the song was subsequently premiered by Emily Laury, a famous opera singer. In 1855, John Sullivan Dwight translated the "O Holy Night" into English.

#### Musical Overview

"O Holy Night" has a controversial, albeit intriguing history. The dissensions attached to it can be connected with two distinct facts - Placide Cappeau, the lyricist being an atheist, and Adolphe Adams, the composer being a Jew. Neither were so-called "church regulars," which created a furor among the conservative Church authorities. Although "O Holy Night" was initially incorporated and accepted into Christmas services, its Atheist-Jewish origin was soon discovered.

The carol was subsequently declared unsuitable for Christmas services and received an immense amount of flak for a "lack of musical flavor" and the stark absence of religious spirit. The lyrics focused on humanity and championed humility. The fact that all men and women can have "souls" was considered to be highly radical at that time. The Catholic Church tried its best to bury the song, and somewhat succeed. However, the English translation by John Sullivan Dwight revived it, focusing on the universality of the "human spirit." Dwight's version quickly became famous in the United States of America due to the ongoing Civil War.

The carol had its unique energy and effects throughout history. In the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, a French soldier started singing "O Holy Night" on Christmas Eve. This event took place in the middle of a fight when the soldier suddenly stood up in his trench and faced the perplexed Germans unarmed and broke out into the song. The legend goes that, the Germans responded by singing a carol of their own. The hostilities were subsequently ceased for 24 hours, and soldiers from both camps celebrated Christmas.

Reginald Fessenden, a Canadian inventor helped devise the radio, and after briefly studying the bible, he started play-

ing the tune of "O Holy Night" into a microphone. This was again reflected on the Christmas Eve of 1906 when sailors across the Atlantic were stunned to hear a man's voice and music coming out of the wireless machines that generally transmitted morse codes. The teary-eyed sailors floating in the dark oceans were mesmerized, and very much awestruck by the transcendent melody as it was played on the radio. Finally, in 1933, the carol succeeded in gaining mass recognition in the contemporary music industry.

The song has several recorded versions and has left a vast footprint among "religious music," "classical music," and "popular music" singers over time.

- In 1960, Nat King Cole used this song in his album titled "The Magic of Christmas."
- In 1992, the song featured in the "Wisepack White Christmas Compilation CD," a collaboration by "The Original Drifters" and Bill Pinkney.
- David Foster, the eminent singer-songwriter, has produced and arranged the song for multiple artists. In 1993, Michael Crawford sang "O Holy Night" for Foster's "The Christmas Album." He again sang a rendition of the song for "The David Foster Christmas Album," a corresponding special for television. The former version reached rank No. 48 in 1993 "Billboard Top 200."

"O Holy Night" has always been alluring, and holds true to the fact that *"music is might."* In spite of multiple controversies, multiple instances when it had to be sanitized to suit the narrative of the church, it has reclaimed its charm. It has survived its multiple detractors and has carved a niche of its own in musical history. The saccharine glaze of its melody blended sublimely with its English version, offering a delicate aura of elevated abstraction, which is a far cry from the original French narrative. "O Holy Night" is truly fascinating. It offers the truest feeling and appeals to our intellectual temper, crafting a beautiful image - a serenely beaming sense of love and yearning for unity.

(excerpt from: [galaxymusicnotes.com](http://galaxymusicnotes.com))

### O Holy Night

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining,  
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth;  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn;

#### Chorus

Fall on your knees, Oh hear the angel voices!  
O night divine! O night when Christ was born.  
O night, O holy night, O night divine.

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