

December 24, 2007
7:30 Worship Program
Rev. Clare Petersberger
Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas

WELCOME

We gather on another Christmas Eve to tell the ancient story, to sing familiar carols, to light candles in the darkness, and to recommit ourselves to the vision of peace on earth.

Tonight we remember how there were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to ALL people. For unto you is born this day a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward all."

OPENING WORDS

Thank you, TUUC Choir and Joe for your lovely rendition of *Silver Bells*. That song was written after World War II when Americans were migrating to cities and there were still lots of bells being rung in cathedral towers, on horse-drawn carriages in New York, and in the hands of people seeking donations to help feed the poor and needy.

In our Opening Words, my colleague, The Reverend Richard Gilbert, suggests that sound, and songs in particular, help us to pause and pay attention to our lives. In *Practicing The Scales of Rejoicing* Dick writes: We had forgotten how to sing until angel voices from mythical realms of glory split the night with their song. We had forgotten how dark and deep the night until the pure light of a birthing star opened our unseeing eyes.

We had forgotten the miracle of new life until some unknown poet caught and sang the mystery. Somewhere between the triumphant night of birth and the dark day of death we stand; For the time being is all we have for practicing the scales of rejoicing, for singing into the dark and unknown night, for flinging faithful tunes against the cold silence, for beating rhythms of the soul over the cosmic cacophony, for making melodies of meaning in the midst of senseless space, for drawing from constricted voices sounds of joy despite all sadness.... For the time being is all we have for practicing the scales of rejoicing.

SONG

Over a century earlier, another Unitarian minister, The Reverend Dr. Edmund Hamilton Sears had also been touched by Luke's narrative of the angels' splitting the night with their song.

In December of 1849, the country was beginning to split in the debate over slavery, and Dr. Sears was faced with tremendous poverty in his own community in Wayland Massachusetts. Dr. Sears was

inspired by Luke's narrative to write a poem for his congregation, urging his congregation to reflect Jesus's teachings in their own life, to reach out to the poor, and to address the nation's social ills.

One of his verses in *It Came Upon A Midnight Clear*, has sadly continued to prove true: with the woes of war and strife the world has suffered long. During World War I, American troops sang this carol throughout France. During World War II, Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore performed this carol as U.S.O. shows throughout the Pacific and Europe.

Today, we still await the time when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling. Let us join our voices with the angels, and generations before us.

CHALICE LIGHTING

Tonight, we sense our kinship with all people,

**As the gentle glow of candlelight illumines our true features:
the grief and gladness written on each face giving dignity to every countenance.**

We pray that the divinity within every person might be made visible tonight

**That every eye might see the world in newborn beauty and that every voice might sing
in praise.**

READING

Our first reading is about muddling through, somehow, in the desire to have a Merry Little Christmas. It is adapted from a letter addressed to Admiral David L. McDonald by William J. Lederer about A Sailor's Christmas Gift.

Dear Admiral,

Last year at Christmas time my wife, our three boys and I were in France on our way from Paris to Nice. For five wretched days everything had gone wrong.

On Christmas Eve, when we checked into a dingy hotel in Nice, there was no Christmas spirit in our hearts. It was raining and cold when we went out to eat. We found a drab little joint shoddily decorated for the holidays. Only a couple of tables in the restaurant were occupied. In the corner, a piano player listlessly played Christmas music. The other customers were eating in stony silence. The only person who seemed happy was an American sailor. While eating he was writing a letter, and a half-smile covered his face.

My wife ordered our meal in French. The waiter brought us the wrong thing, so I scolded my wife. She began to cry. The boys defended her, and I felt even worse. Then at the table on our left, the father yelled at one of the children for some minor infraction, and the boy began to cry. On our right, a woman began berating her husband.

All of us were interrupted by an unpleasant blast of cold air. Through the front door came an old French flower woman. She wore a dripping, tattered overcoat and shuffled in on wet, rundown shoes. Carrying her basket of flowers, she went from one table to the other. "*Flowers, monsieur? Only one franc.*" None bought any.

Wearily she sat down at a table between the sailor and us. To the waiter she said, "A bowl of soup. I haven't sold a flower all afternoon." To the piano player she said hoarsely, "Can you imagine, Joseph, soup on Christmas Eve?" He pointed to his empty tipping plate.

The young sailor finished his meal and got up to leave. He walked over to the flower woman's table. "Happy Christmas!" he said, smiling, and picking out two corsages, asked, "How much are they?" "Two francs, monsieur." He put one into the letter he had written; handed the woman a 20-franc note and said, "This is my Christmas present to you." Straightening up, he came to our table gave my wife the corsage, wished us a Merry Christmas, and departed.

Everyone had stopped eating. Everyone was watching the sailor. Everyone was silent. A few seconds later, the old flower woman jumped up, having the 20-franc note. She shouted to the piano player, "Joseph, you shall have half so you can have a feast too." The piano player began to beat out "Good King Wenceslaus." My wife waved her corsage in time with the rhythm, the corners of her mouth turned up in laughter. She began to sing, and our three sons joined her.

"Gut, gut," shouted the Germans. They jumped on their chairs and began singing in German. The Frenchman who had yelled at his son beat rhythm with a fork against a bottle. The lad climbed on his lap, singing in a youthful soprano. People crowded in from the street until many customers were standing. The walls shook as hands and feet kept time to the carols. A few hours earlier, a few people had been spending a miserable evening in a shoddy restaurant. It ended up being the very best Christmas Eve they had ever spent.

This, Admiral McDonald, is what I am writing you about. As the top man in the Navy, you should be proud because your young sailor had the Christmas spirit in his Soul, he released love and joy and gave us Christmas. Thank you very much.

READING

Our next reading explores what it means to be "home" for Christmas. *Christmas Echo* by Les Thomas begins with a weather report on the radio: "The temperature is thirty-five degrees under cloudy skies. The National Weather Service forecasts a thirty percent chance of snow tonight. It could be the first white Christmas on record here in forty-one years."

The radio voice startled the old man who had been asleep in his stuffed chair by the fireplace. One word fixed his attention on the broadcast. Snow. "That's always what they say," he muttered to himself. "But I don't see how it can happen. Not cold enough." Still, the prospect was enough to make him walk slowly over to the window. He craned his neck to look as far as he could in both directions. There was not a trace of a snowflake.

He turned around and his gaze fell on the photograph in the silver frame on top of the piano. There were two people in the picture. One was a pleasant looking woman with brown hair who was dressed in an old-fashioned heavy winter coat and high shoes. The other was a girl of about six. They were holding hands....standing in snow. Brubaker was 72 years old. A long time ago, he promised himself that he would try to not think so much about the people in the photograph. But each Christmas it was a promise he never tried to keep.

Feeling chill, Brubaker shivered suddenly and coughed. He got up and walked into the kitchen, found the empty prescription bottle, and called Smith's Pharmacy. When Samuel Smith hung up the

telephone, he told Billy, the high school senior who was sweeping away the last debris of the Christmas Eve rush, *"Looks like you'll have to make one last delivery."* Billy would be going on a full scholarship to the state school to study science. The only thing he could do as well was play the horn. He even played trumpet with a group for weekend dances. But you can't make a living with that kind of music. Those days were gone and Billy knew it. As Sam began to fill a small brown bottle with syrup, he continued, *"Now THERE was a musician. Old Ed Brubaker could play with the best of him."*

Music was Ed's whole life. Ed saw to it there was always music. Easter. The Fourth of July...all the holidays. But the best of it, the very best was always Christmas Eve. The band would all pile in those old cars and go up to the mountain. Everybody in town used to wait up to hear it. Just before midnight, Ed would raise up that trumpet and then he'd start to play...real low at first... Lord, it was music so sweet you'd have bet it was Gabriel himself calling you." But after Ed's wife and daughter died, he never played music again.

When Billy handed Ed Brubaker the package, Billy saw him drop a metal object into his pocket, as if to hide it. Still, Billy recognized instantly that the old man had been holding a trumpet mouthpiece in his hand. After pouring a teaspoon of the cough medicine, Brubaker put on his coat and went to sit on his garden bench. His thoughts drifted back to Christmases of long ago, Christmases that might have been. He tried to picture the three of them together, laughing, happy. In his hands, the silver trumpet reflected in the moonlight. Then he heard it. Faint at first...the notes were clear and mellow, ringing like wisps of wind, coming unmistakably from the mountain.

With each bar of the Christmas carol, the trumpet's call seemed to grow, like a choir adding voices. Brubaker felt emotions welling with each note. Like a man in a dream, he picked up the trumpet and, lifting it to his lips, began to play an echo to the mountain serenade, a salute to the unseen musician. Together the two voices in harmony soared over the notes, calling each to the other's call and showering the silent city with a serenade. Billy could still hear the echo pounding in his ears when he reached down and closed the snaps of his trumpet case. Across the town, when the music ended, Sam Smith was at a window. *"Melinda,"* he said to his wife, *"Come see. It's snowing."*

PRAYER- MEDITATION

Let us continue in the spirit of prayer with a spoken meditation by The Rev. Kim Beach which will be followed by the sung prayer *Dona Nobis Pacem*.

Thou who comes to us in gifts of love, O God, come to us again this night of solemn and joyful songs, this season of waiting and seeking, this age of adventure and return.

Be present in the music we offer and in all our gifts given in love. We celebrate in song your coming to us, and dwelling among us, in the tiny, fragile form of an infant. Be thou among us in spirit and in truth this night of solemn and joyful song.

We seek signs of hope in a cynical and despairing world; signs of love in a harsh, unkind world; sings of peace in an agonized, war-torn world. For the coming of that time when all care and all are cared for, we seek with all our heart and soul and mind. Be thou with us in this season of waiting and seeking.

We grow up and venture forth – bravely – to make our own way, boldly to be on our own. Yet the deep enduring memory of Christmas calls us home once again. This is a season of grace for the whole human family.

May all thy people, of every faith, in every land, find safety in their distant adventures, and return at last, singing joyful songs. Be thou the assurance of peace to every longing heart, and may we sing together, at last, in your peaceable kingdom.

Dona Nobis Pacem.

READING

And our final reading, tonight, is from *Stories Behind The Best loved Songs Of Christmas* by Ace Collins. One of the most famous modern-day Christmas songs was written on one of the hottest California days on record in 1946.

When Mel Torme arrived at the home of Robert Wells, he found Wells trying to drive off the California heat with fans and positive thinking. Torme recalled, “I saw a spiral pad on his piano with four lines written in pencil. They started, ‘*Chestnuts roasting... Jack Frost nipping... Yuletide carols... Folks dressed up like Eskimos.*’” Bob said he thought if he could immerse himself in winter, he could cool off.

Chestnuts had started Wells’s strange train of thought. He had seen his mother bring in a bag of them to stuff a turkey for dinner. Wells was thrown back to the days when he saw vendors selling chestnuts on New York City street corners. While Wells was after nothing more than an attempt to “think cold,” Mel Torme caught a glimpse of a song in the phrases he had written.

With the temperature in the nineties and both men sweating through their clothes, they got to work on what was to become a Christmas classic. It took just forty minutes. Then they climbed into a car and dropped by Nat King Cole’s home uninvited. When Mel played the new Christmas number, it didn’t cool anyone off, but Cole was deeply impressed.

Cole’s cut of the Wells/Torme song became the first Christmas standard introduced by an African American. The success of that cut helped open the door for Lou Rawls, Ray Charles, and Ethel Waters to put their own spins on holiday classics. It gave black audiences a chance to hear their favorite stars sing the carols that they loved. Thanks to “The Christmas Song,” for the first time in the commercial marketplace, Christmas was not reserved for “whites only.”

SERMON

Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas

When Joe, Joyce, and I met in the fall to begin planning worship services for the winter holidays, Joe asked me if I had any ideas for tonight’s service. The thought that immediately came to mind was that wherever I went LAST December, I inevitably heard some rendition of *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*. I was reminded of this, last week, driving home from an outing with a TUUC family. As the mother identified the next song on the radio, she said, “*You know, we’ve decided this station has a repertoire of exactly eight Christmas songs which they simply play over and over again.*” When I asked which eight songs they were, I was not surprised how many dated back to the 1940’s.

When I made the suggestion that tonight's service focus on holiday music from World War II, Joe Gascho's response was, "*The Choir can do that, Clare. But do you think you can build a whole service around it?*" I thought that I could. More than that, I thought I should.

One of my friends has two children serving in Iraq. When her children enlisted, four and a half years ago, to further their education, they thought the war would be long over before the issue of deployment would arise. When I ask my friend how she is doing, she says she tries to keep busy. When she hears of casualties, she tries not to worry. And even when she can't communicate with her children, as long as she doesn't hear a knock on her door, she chooses to believe they are safe.

We are in a war. We are in a very different war from World War II. One difference is that, as a nation, we are not asked to think, daily, about our troops. Advertisements in World War II urged consumers to purchase gifts for "their favorite patriot," or to buy a new pen "to bring a new ease of writing those morale-building letters between home and the front." And Americans responded.

In 1942, post offices warned people to get holiday packages in the mail by October 15th – otherwise they might not arrive in time. That year, Time magazine reported "There was hardly a person who had not sent a package, or at least a letter, to a man in uniform."

A second difference was that during World War II, most families had a relative serving overseas. At the holidays, especially, most people were yearning to be closer to their loved ones. Best-selling books at Macy's in 1943 reflected missing a spouse who was away from home with titles like, *Your Husband's Gone to War* and *the Navy Wife*.

A third difference is that because of rationing, no family remained untouched by the consequences of our country being at war. Sometimes the sacrifices seemed small. For example, in early December 1942, the War Production Board ruled, on account of sugar rationing, that chocolate St. Nicholas figures would not be made and sold that year. One woman, who was a teenager in 1942, remembers how a soldier, who was a family friend, mailed, from overseas, a huge box of Milky Ways to her family in Long Beach, California. She said, "So much chocolate when there was no chocolate at all. I sat and cried. It took up the better part of the refrigerator, just like a turkey. We didn't even want to eat it. Because we knew when it was gone, there wasn't gonna be anymore... It was a big treat just to open the refrigerator and SEE this chocolate."

Other sacrifices were larger. Sugar was not the only thing rationed. Other food items were rationed – including turkeys and hams. Families in neighborhoods used to trade ration stamps for the things they needed to help one another through the difficult times. Gasoline was also rationed, making holiday travels much more challenging.

And so the yearning for home, for security, and for a release from anxiety was particularly strong when MGM filmed *Meet Me in St. Louis* in 1943. Those of you who have seen it, will remember the plot did not reference the war, directly. Instead, the Smith family faces being forced to move from their home in St. Louis to New York without seeing the World's Fair that year. On Christmas Eve, nine-year-old Tootie is worried that if they move, Santa will not be able to find her. Her older sister has just fallen in love and realizes that her relationship may end because of this move. Both sisters feel like their world is coming to an end.

And that is when Judy Garland winds up the music box and begins to sing *Have Yourself a Very Merry Christmas* to Margaret O' Brian. But when she first looked at the song, Judy Garland loved the

melody and refused to sing the words. Because the original words read, “Have yourself a merry little Christmas, it may be your last, next year we may all be living in the past...and “faithful friends who are dear to us will be near to us no more.”

Judy told Hugh Martin, “If I sing that lyric to little Margaret O’Brien, the audience will think I’m a monster.” But Judy Garland had another reason to want the lyrics changed. She’d been entertaining American troops for the previous three years. She knew they were mostly young men, her age, who hoped they would survive the war, and return home. In Ace Collins words, “They wanted, NEEDED to believe that there was a lot of life left in front of them.” The lyrics were changed to “let your heart be light; from now on our troubles will be out of sight.” And we humans have need of such hope – especially in dark times.

On Christmas Eve 1941, a little over two weeks after Pearl Harbor, the bus depot in Albert Lea, Minnesota was full of servicemen and women trying to get home to their families. But when the bus arrived, there were too many passengers for the available seats. The driver told those waiting there was no room. They would have to take the next bus and wouldn’t make it home for Christmas. Other passengers spoke up. Let them on. We’ll make room. They can sit on our laps. And so they did. Everyone boarded the bus. They sang Christmas carols, shared cookies, and wished a Merry Christmas each time a person reached his or her destination.

One passenger said she could never remember feeling a greater sense of peace, fellowship, and contentment. It was like the family in Nice that muddled through the first uncomfortable moments in the diner only, thanks to the kindness of the sailor, to have the best Christmas Eve, ever.

However, Martin changed the lyrics one more time, when Frank Sinatra said he didn’t like “Until then we’ll have to muddle through somehow.” Martin said he was relieved when he thought of, “Hang a shining star upon the highest bough,” because “other than ‘cow’ there aren’t many appropriate rhymes for “ow.”

Another person who, like Judy Garland knew what the public wanted to hear in a time of war was Irving Berlin, author of *White Christmas*. Berlin used to say, “There’s nothing so corny as last year’s sophistication.”

Berlin knew that with the turmoil in Europe, Americans were longing for domestic bliss. He wrote *White Christmas* in one night, using a piano that had a special lever for changing keys since he had never formally learned to play and used only the black keys of F sharp while composing.

The next morning, he told his transcriber, “Not only is this the best song I ever wrote, it’s the best song anybody ever wrote.” Not everyone agreed.

In 1942, a journalist wrote in *Daily Variety* that *White Christmas* won’t make it because it was “too schmaltzy.” But Bing Crosby sang it for the first time during a radio program on Christmas Day 1941. And American soldiers, during World War II, longing for home, quickly adopted *White Christmas* as their personal anthem. Berlin said, “It became a peace song in war time.”

What made this song less schmaltzy for me, was learning the personal pain out of which Berlin, himself, wrote “White Christmas.” His father, a cantor, had taught Berlin to sing. And though the family did not celebrate Christmas, their neighbors on the Lower East Side did. Their neighbors were also poor. Their tree had broken branches and was not tall.

But Berlin remembered, “to me that first tree seemed to tower to Heaven.” Berlin’s father died when he was 12 and he ran away from home to sing in Tin Pan Alley. Eleven years later, Berlin’s first wife contracted typhoid fever on their honeymoon and died barely five months after their marriage. Berlin paid a florist to place a white rose on her grave every other day for thirteen years until he remarried. And he and his second wife had one son, who died at the age of three weeks on December 25th, 1928. They secretly went to the cemetery every Christmas Eve, thereafter, to put flowers on his grave.

So the loneliness of *White Christmas* was genuine. And, yet, like Billy connecting with Mr. Brubaker, when Berlin was in his 90’s, a small group of carolers would gather in front of Berlin’s New York City home each Christmas Eve to sing him, *White Christmas*. In 1983, he invited them in to thank them. He said it was the nicest Christmas present anyone ever gave him.

During World War II, songs were written to reflect the yearning for home, the release of anxiety, the need for hope, and the promise of peace. Today, we are in a different war. Our lives are not as directly affected. We are not asked to make the same sacrifices. And yet, and yet, we, too yearn for “Faithful friends who are dear to us” to “gather near to us once more;” to “hear yuletide carols sung by a choir;” to travel to the place “Where the treetops glisten, and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow” and to be “where the love light gleams.”

As we join in the beloved ritual of passing the light while singing “Silent Night,” may we be reminded that the hopes of all the years are met in us. And may the world know a different song because we share ours.

CLOSING WORDS

All the earth rejoices in the gladness of goodwill, and everywhere our hungry hearts await the word of peace. May we be messengers of Christmas Joy bearers of its glad tidings, servants of its gracious spirit, and toilers for a world of kindness and goodwill.

Go now in peace and with joy to have yourselves a Merry Little Christmas!
