

THE PIEDMONT EPISTLE

PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS BY WORD AND DEED

December 2017

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Christmas is a season for singing. It always has been. Beginning on that wondrous night when angelic choirs hovered over Bethlehem's field and down to our own day, Christmas songs have cheered the world with the greatest news in history. Of all our holy days, it's the season of Christmas that most invites our songs. In fact, we have a special name for Christmas hymns. We call them "carols," from the old Latin word meaning choral song, and they are among the best-known songs in the world.



Yet, according to Reformed theologian Peter Leithart, our carols are missing something. Leithart, who is known for his incisive and astute observations, questions the way that many of Christmas hymns fail to capture the political and social context of the birth of Jesus Christ. The Messiah, you understand, was expected to be a political and military leader, and his coming signaled the Lord's redemption of Israel from oppression, which was identified, not with the powers of sin, death and the devil, but the very concrete form of the Romans. Christmas hymns rarely acknowledge this fact. By contrast, *Advent* hymns, Leithart claims, capture the significance of Christ's coming for the here and now: "Advent hymns," Leithart argues, "look forward not to *heaven* but the redemption of Israel and of the nations, the coming of God's kingdom on earth."¹ For Leithart, we would all be better off ridding ourselves of hymns that fail to include the deeply political and social aspects of the original Christmas story.

There is some truth to Leithart's critique, we have to admit. Many of our most beloved hymns contain precisely the kind of otherworldly message that Leithart deplors. But before we call for a boycott on Christmas hymns, we should remember that these hymns, while not political, contain powerful reminders of the profound, universal dimension of Christmas—a dimension which we neglect at our spiritual peril.

Indeed, our Christmas hymns often highlight dimensions of the gospel that are too often overlooked in our times. Luke's account, for example, includes a cosmic vision of angels, multitudes of the heavenly host, signs, and promises of universal renewal. This is precisely what Charles Wesley captures in the majesty of "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" (Hymn #87, 1739). In its original version, this hymn, which refers to Christ as the "Prince of Peace" and "Sun of Righteousness" who "lays His glory by," is a mystical portrait of creation restored by union with

¹ http://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2012/12/how-nt-wright-stole-christmas/?permalink=blogs&blog=leithart&year=2012&month=12&entry_permalink=22%2Fhow-nt-wright-stole-christmas%2F

the divine. You hardly ever here of such biblical themes today, yet they are important parts—central parts—of Christian faith we must preserve.

Isaac Watts’s “Joy to the World” (Hymn #100, 1719), one of the most beloved Christmas hymns, points to a similar reality in a striking third stanza:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.



This is the message of good news that Christians celebrate each year. The birth of Christ reminds us that all is not well in the world. The curse of Adam (i.e. “thorns”) has reigned since time immemorial, but it has been broken. And now we wait in expectation for things to be made fully right. The “sins and sorrows” of violence, poverty, and death are defeated in the Incarnation, but the culmination of Christ’s work, the restoration of the whole of creation, is coming.

Allusions to the “spiritual” or “theological” significance of Christmas can be seen also in “Good Christian friends, rejoice” (Hymn #107), a Medieval hymn that has been translated into dozens of languages. In it, we recall that Christ “has opened heaven's door, and we are blest forevermore” and “now ye need not fear the grave: Jesus Christ was born to save!”

If one desires an explicitly “political” hymn, though, one has only to consider “O holy night” (1847). The writer, a French wine merchant and poet, speaks to the political controversies of his day (slavery) when he proclaims: “His law is love and His gospel is peace./ Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother, And in His name all oppression shall cease.” Even here, though, the spiritual or theological aspects are not overlooked: “Long lay the world in sin and error pining,/ Till He appear'd and the soul felt its worth.”



The real “political” import of Christmas carols, like that of Christmas itself, is found, however, not in their addressing the political issues of the time they were written, but in their power to transcend and challenge those politics. I’m thinking, for example, of the Christmas truce of 1914. On a crisp, clear morning, in the midst of the bitter World War I, thousands of British, Belgian and French soldiers put down their rifles, stepped out of their trenches and spent Christmas mingling with their German enemies along the Western front. The Germans began Christmas eve singing one of their carols and then the Allied soldiers sang one of theirs, until they started up “O Come, All Ye Faithful” (Hymn #83) and the Germans immediately joined in singing the same hymn to the Latin words *Adeste Fideles*—both sides singing the same carol in the middle of a war. The next morning, German soldiers emerged from their trenches, calling out “Merry Christmas” in English, and Allied soldiers came out warily to greet them. Over the course of the day, troops exchanged gifts of cigarettes, food, buttons and hats. Their generals, of course, were furious:

fraternizing with their opponents was a threat to morale. It's tremendously difficult to demonize and shoot someone with whom one has just sung carols and exchanged gifts!

The dismissal of Christmas hymns is the consequence of historical shortsightedness. Many English hymns, as a matter of fact, were written in times of great social and political struggle, and if we are to understand and appreciate them and their message, we need to understand them in the socio-political world in which they were written. Those composed between the 1750s to the 1850s were composed in an age of unchecked industrialization, obscene child labor practices, and global catastrophes. But it was precisely in their otherworldliness These hymns, , offered hope of change on a *cosmic* scale. It was this otherworldliness that this vision for a world restored and healed and set right by Christ inspired and empowered everyday Christians to dig into the messy political matters of their day. And they offer us the same encouragement.

We face obstacles no less severe in our own day. Christmas hymns subtly challenge the political optimism of our day with a vision of something beyond our world. Perhaps we do not feel the need for such encouragement, but the fact is, not everyone lives in comfort, travels in safety, and enjoys the privileges of modern society as we do. For those who feel the pangs of deep despair, these revered Christmas hymns offer something this world does not offer—a cosmic vision that only Scripture provides.



The message of Christmas hymns is clear. Things are not the way they should be. Change must come. But the horizons of God's redemption far exceeds our limited vision. God's promised peace surpasses the most profound social and political renewal we can contemplate.

So, before we throw away our hymnals, let's take another look at the Christmas message. Perhaps we'll rediscover the God who humbled himself and offered us cosmic renewal beyond even our wildest dreams.

Yours in Christ,

W Terry Miller

The Rev. W. Terry Miller

Announcements

Pledge Campaign

You are invited to consider and pray about what God is asking you to contribute to the mission and ministry of Piedmont in the next year. The goal in the church remains the “tithe”, or a tenth of one’s income, for all that we have we have been given by God. Please prayerfully consider your pledge and turn it in to Nanette Crowdus before **December 17**, when we will be dedicating our pledges.

Winter Clothes Collection—For the first two weeks of the month, we will be collecting new or gently used gloves, scarves, hats and coats to give away to those without proper winter attire. Please contact Deacon Kathryn if you have any items you’d like to share. The items will be distributed on **December 17**.

Bishop’s Visit —The Rt. Rev. Susan Goff, Bishop Suffragan (Assistant) of the Diocese of Virginia, will be visiting Piedmont on Sunday, **December 17** at 10 a.m. This is an opportunity for anyone new to the Episcopal Church or who has not been confirmed to be received into the church and confirmed. Please contact Fr. Terry if interested.

Angel Tree – Piedmont Church is working with the Skyline Cap Head Start Program to provide young children with Christmas gifts and books. Gift requests can be selected from the Angel Tree in the Parish house. Please sign your name on the sheet once you have selected an angel so that we can check the gifts before delivery. Wrapped toys, with the angel tied to the package, should be returned to the Parish House by **December 17** in order for them to be delivered for the Christmas Party.

Christmas Pageant – Written and directed by Beverly Young, this year’s pageant is titled "In Excelsis Deo" and is a musical and dramatic retelling of the Christmas story from Luke, with a few twists, as usual. The children will present the pageant as part of the worship service on **December 17**.

Greening of the Church and Altar Guild Meeting—Altar Guild members and anyone who enjoys decorating are invited to meet at the church on Saturday morning at **10:00 a.m., December 23**, to prepare the sanctuary for the Christmas services.

Christmas Services

Christmas Eve Service

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24 @ 7:30pm—Come all ye faithful and your families too! (*Note new time*)

Christmas Day Service

MONDAY, DECEMBER 25 @ 8AM—Celebrate the birth of our Savior Christmas morn at this solemn, richly traditioned service.

Christmas Lessons and Carols,

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 31 @ 10am-- Join us as we proclaim Christmas in word and song through a series of readings from Holy Scripture, hymns, anthems and instrumental music.

PRAYER JOYS & CONCERNS

We offer prayers of healing for friends and family:

Sarah Aloumouati	Reggie Hall (Barbara	Bernie Valdez
Melvin Amos	Straightiff's brother-	Donna Whitman
Corey Barker	in-law)	(friend of the
The Barksdale Family	Chloe Hammer (Jean	Griffiths)
Emily Begovitch	Kane's sister)	Augusta Woodward
(Kathy Henken's	Luke Harbert,	Kimberley Yarbrough
niece)	Ted and Rene Hinds	(friend of Sherry
Nicky Bourgeois	Skip McDanolds	Spencer with an
(Doris Lackey's	The Hitt family	auto-immune
friend)	Sue Lam	disease)
Fran Bowers	Ren LeVally (Dink's	Alex Yowell
Jean Brashears	son)	Jeff Yowel
Max Brown (Sue	Laura Maddox	
Burnett's friend, 4-	The Miller Family	
y.o.)	Ruby Minick	
Lanee Butler	(grandmother of a	
Jane Cameer	friend of Kay John)	
Beth Caywood	Rosalie Mow (Doug's	
Doris & Roland	mother)	
Chapman	Susan Mowchan	
Sandra Clore (Waltine	Dorothy Mudd	
Robinson's niece)	Susan Muston	
Heather Comer	Donna Nettles	
The Cox family	Amanda Paff	
Harley Cronk	Sara Parmenter	
David Cronk	Maria Rosenberg	
Sara DeLaurentis (Sue	Doreen Russell	
Burnett's niece)	Myia MacKenzie	
The Filmore Family	Shifflett	
Patrick & Sean Fohner	Ann Skidmore	
James Gardiner	Lorraine Sandifer	
Lisa Gardner	Jacqueline Smith	
Cynthia Gerstner	Judy Taylor (friend of	
Carrie Gilles	Kathy Henken)	
Jacob Good	Betty Thomas (friend	
Griff & Vera Griffin	of Barbara	
Stanley Griffin (Vera &	Straightiff)	
Griff's son)	Matt Tsun	
Mary Haley	Robert Ulrich	

We offer prayers of healing and God's loving presence for friends living in nursing home care: Barbara Kiley and Jane Chapman.

We pray for peace and the restoration of people's safety and dignity in Philippines, Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Iran, Sudan, West Africa, and the Congo. We pray for the victims of violence in Beirut, Baghdad, Kenya, Paris, and San Bernardino.

We pray for the men and women in the armed services, especially Mike Butterworth, Patrick DaSilva, Graham Davidson, Sean Hegg, R.E. Hutton, Nathan Kinkey, Brian Mainwaring, Jeffery Mainwaring, Todd Mainwaring, Anthony Mark, and Clay Puryear, and for our first responders. We pray for our presiding bishop, Michael Curry; our bishops, Shannon Johnston, Susan Goff, Ted Gulick, the churches of the Diocese of Virginia, and for our 70 million brothers and sisters in our 30 member Hill Anglican Communion.

We pray for the families in Barbara's House; for the work of Madison Emergency Services Association, Madison Free Clinic, Literacy Council of Madison County, Boy's and Girl's Club of Madison, Senior Nutrition Site, Madison County Education Foundation, Boy Scout Troop 116, and Madison Strong.

We pray for our youth in college: Nick Bader, Josh Good, Isabella Hansen, Sam Landolt, Paul Jackson, Peter Thawngzauk, Jacob Young, and Nathan Young.

We give thanks to God for all the families in this blessed Piedmont Church. Gracious Lord, guide, preserve and protect your servants as they create for your glory a holy family of love. May their love for each other be a sign of your tender care.

WEEKLY CALENDAR

Sunday 9:45 a.m. Shepherd's Way (Sunday School)
 10:00 a.m. Holy Eucharist Rite II
 11:30 a.m. Fellowship Hour in the parish house
Monday 7:00 p.m. Adult study group at the McDowell's home
Wednesday 10:00 a.m. Community Book Discussion
Thursday 7:00 p.m. Bible Fellowship – parish house

If you know of someone who is unable to get to church, but would like to receive communion, please let Father Terry or Deacon Kathryn know and they will arrange for a visitation.

MESA food donations - Please bring a can, bag, bottle, or box of non-perishable food item. Thanks for your generosity.

Graves Chapel News

The Graves Mill Annual Christmas Dinner will be held, at Graves Chapel, on Saturday December 9, 2017 at 6:00 pm. Please bring a dish for your family and to share with others.

And, in conjunction with the dinner, Chapel decorating will occur the day before on Friday December 8, 2017 at 10:00 am. It's a really fun event and your help will be **greatly** appreciated. If you have access to greenery, please bring it with you or drop some off at the Chapel prior to December 8th. Fresh greenery or similar items will be used for various and sundry decorating purposes.

A week after the dinner, **Christmas Caroling** will be at Graves Chapel on Sunday December 17, 2017 at 5:00 pm. Please join us and help welcome in the new year.

Church Service Volunteer List December 2017

	10th	17th	24th	25th	31st
Lector	Colt Puryear	Briarley Rogers	Doug Mow		Briarley Rogers
Intercessor	Sue Brown	Molly Sanford	Kathryn Thomas		Eve Bargmann
Acolyte/ Crucifer	Jordan Spencer			Molly Sanford	
Chalice	Bob Nowak	Kathryn Thomas	Bob Nowak	Kathryn Thomas	Eve Bargmann
Usher	Nick Spencer	Dink Kreis	Puryear family		
Vestry Person	Dink Kreis	Hardie Newton	Beverly Young	Terry Miller	Reggie Dale
Social Hour	Margeaux McLain	Rita Dellinger			
Altar Care	Beply White and Molly Sanford				