FAITH MATTERS

Embrace both sides of the lyrics of Christmas

Like most of us I have always loved Christmas, and especially the music of Christmas.

But many years ago, long before I had any inkling that one day I would be called to serve the church, I started wondering about the "dark" side of Christmas carols. Why do certain songs about Christ's birth contain references to his suffering and death? For example, why would a beloved carol like "What Child Is This," about a baby born in a manger nestled in its mother's arms, include a stanza about death, dying, and nails piercing bloody hands?

Rev. Nancy Raabe

Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,
The cross be borne for me, for you;
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the Son of Mary!

And what about "The Holly and the Ivy," whose familiar tune brims with Christmas cheer?

The holly and the ivy,
When they are both full grown,
Of all the trees that are in the wood,
The holly bears the crown.

Sounds harmless enough, but wait a minute...what crown are we talking about? Sing on, and you'll discover that it's not a crown of gold but a crown of thorns, as our tongue trips over a berry as red as blood, a prickle as sharp as a thorn, and bark as bitter as gall.

Oh my goodness! What is going on? Why can't we just enjoy images of baby Jesus instead of getting into thorns, blood, and the cross? Because Christ's birth and death are part of the same story. You can't have one without the other. The simple truth is this: Christ was born to die.

The best hymns tell at least part of this story, if not its entirety. Consider the magi's gifts in "We Three Kings." The first traveler brings gold for Christ's kingship. The second carries frankincense representing God's presence. But the third? He trudges in bearing a box of myrrh, a highly scented resin used for embalming:

Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom:
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in a stone cold tomb.

No one would have dreamed of bringing myrrh to our daughter's recent baby shower. But Jesus was no ordinary baby. This third king, or astrologer, or whatever he was, knew that Christ's future was present at his very beginning. So he shopped for his gift in such a way as to honor the fullness of the story of salvation.

"Sweet baby Jesus" is just the first stop on the larger trajectory that ultimately leads to the cross. If we confine ourselves at this time of year to singing simple songs about the baby in the manger, we'll find that those warm fuzzy feelings will quickly fall away in the face of whatever hardship we next encounter.

Be bold, therefore in seeking out the "dark side" of Christmas carols. With the wisdom that comes from realizing you've made it through another year of life on this complex planet, you'll also come to see more clearly how our earthly existence and Jesus' story are intimately woven together.

Because you can't have one without the other.

There is no better summation of the perfect carol Christmas carol than this one by Robert Southwell (1561-1595), made famous in Benjamin Britten's Ceremony of Carols. Here is the first stanza:

This little Babe so few days old
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at His presence quake,
Though He Himself for cold doth shake;
For in this weak unarmed wise
The gates of hell He will surprise.

A merry, meaningful Christmas to you all.

Worship News and Notes

By MediaNews Group

Send items for Worship News to religion@thereporteronline.com. Address questions to Nancy March, editor, at nmarch@thereporteronline.com. Deadline is noon Thursday to appear in the Saturday Worship News and Notes.

▪ **St. John's United Church of Christ**, 500 W. Main St., Lansdale, Christmas services are as follows: Christmas Eve — 5 p.m. Worship with carol singing and music from the Children's Choir, piano, and organ; 11 p.m. Worship of Lessons and Carols with music from the Chancel Choir, United Ringers, string quartet, piano, organ and Holy Communion. Gluten-free bread is available. Service will be available later online; Christmas Day — A pre-recorded video service will be available to watch at St. John's Facebook page, website and YouTube channel: youtube.com/stjohnsucclansdalepa beginning at 9 a.m. The service will be accessible any time afterwards to watch at your convenience. There will be no in-person gathering on Sunday, December 25; New Year's Day — One in-person service at 10:15 a.m. Later the service is available online. Call 215-855-5489 or visit www.st-johns-ucc.org.

▪ **Gwynedd Square Presbyterian Church**, 837 Sumneytown Pike, Lansdale, will have three different opportunities for members of the congregation and the community to worship on Christmas Eve. Each service includes special Christmas music and will end with candle lighting. We invite you to join us as we welcome the Christ child, either in our beautifully decorated sanctuary or online, streamed from the sanctuary via Zoom. Services are 4 p.m. Worship with Praise Singers in person and on Zoom; 7 p.m. Worship with Choir in person and on Zoom; 10 p.m. Worship on Zoom only. For the web link to join via Zoom, please go to our website www.gwyneddsquare.org

▪ **Indian Creek Mennonite Church**, 647 Harleysville Pike, Telford, will conduct services as follows: Sunday school, 9 a.m.; worship service, 10:15 a.m. Christmas Day Sunday school, 9 a.m.; worship service, 10:15 a.m. Questions? Call Kevin Moyer (215) 721-9127.

▪ **Grace Lutheran Church**, 40 N. Main St., Hatfield, will offer Christmas Eve services at 4, 6:30 and 9 p.m., Lessons and Carols on Christmas Day at 10:30 a.m., and the First Sunday of Christmas January 1 at 10:30 a.m. The 10:30 Sunday worship services are streamed live under "Online Worship" at gracelutheranhatfield.org, where you may also follow Pastor Nancy M. Raabe's daily "Advent Pilgrimage" under the Home menu. For more information, call 215-855-4676.

▪ **The Church of the Holy Spirit of Harleysville (Episcopal)**, 2871 Barndt Road at the corner of Sumneytown Pike, Upper Salford: Christmas Eve services will be on Saturday, December 24, including 11 a.m. Holy Eucharist service with hymns, 4 p.m. Eucharist service for families featuring the children's choir and Nativity story, and an 8 p.m. Candlelight Eucharist service with choir and handbell music. On Christmas Day Sunday, one service of Holy Eucharist with carols will be held at 10:15 a.m. Services are led by the Rev. Kathy Andonian, Rector. For more information, call 215-234-8020 or visit the church webpage, www.churchoftheholyspirit.us.

▪ **Gwynedd Square Presbyterian Church PC(USA)**, 837 Sumneytown Pike, Lansdale: Please join live in the sanctuary or via Zoom with an internet-enabled device or by telephone. Sunday Worship is at 10 a.m. and Early Worship is at 8:30 a.m. For web links or dial in numbers, please visit www.gwyneddsquare.org. Weekly Bible Study meets at 10 a.m. in the pastor's study and on Zoom and will meet every Wednesday at this time. Please send an email to office@gwyneddsquare.org or call the church office at 215-699-9159.

▪ **Montco Bible Fellowship**, 160 E. Main St., Lansdale, holds virtual services accessed via website (www.montcobf.org) or in-person each Sunday. Adult Sunday School begins at 9:30 a.m. and worship services at 10 a.m., along with Children's Church at 10 a.m. Virtual Bible Study on Wednesdays at 7:20 p.m. Call 215-855-0899 for the Bible Study Zoom link.

▪ **Faith Lutheran Church**, 615 Cowpath Road, Montgomeryville, continues to worship in the sanctuary as well as on Zoom at 10:30 a.m. Sunday School is held Sundays from 9:45 to 10:25 a.m. for ages 3-11. Nursery will be provided for the 3- to 5-year-olds during the 10:30 a.m. service. All services will also be uploaded to Facebook. Find that at www.faithmontgomerville.org and click on "Connect on Facebook." For the Zoom link or more information, please email faithmont@verizon.net

▪ **The Church of the Holy Spirit of Harleysville (Episcopal)**, 2871 Barndt Road at the corner of Sumneytown Pike, Upper Salford, holds Holy Communion services in-person at 8 and 10:15 a.m. on Sundays. The church also live-streams the 10:15 a.m. services on Sundays on the church website and Facebook page, Church of the Holy Spirit, Harleysville. Church school for preschool through adult classes begins at 9 a.m. A special Epiphany study will be led by the Rev. Dennis Brice at noon on Jan. 8. Services are led by the Rev. Kathy Andonian, Rector. For more information, call 215-234-8020 or visit the church webpage, www.churchoftheholyspirit.us.

▪ The January Tuesday at Noon Organ Recitals will again be held at the **North Wales Borough Arts and Cultural Center**, 125 N. Main Street, North Wales, formerly St. Luke's United Church of Christ. These free recitals are sponsored by the Philadelphia Chapter of the American Guild of Organists. The January 3rd performer will be David Furniss, the retired Music Director from St. John's UCC, Lansdale. The remaining schedule includes the following organists, Jan. 10 — Paul Fejko; Jan. 17 — Vincent M. Ryan; Jan. 24 — Emily Amos, and Jan. 31 — Aaron Patterson. This is the 50th anniversary of these AGO sponsored Tuesday noon recitals. For more information contact Jon at 215.368.2884.

Lansdale

FROM PAGE 1

The budget itself was passed unanimously with no discussion, but the tax ordinance drew comments from councilman BJ Breish, who vowed earlier this month to revisit each line item to look for costs to cut, and said Wednesday he had done so.

"We looked at every single line item; thanks to borough staff for answering all of my follow-up emails, there were many," Breish said.

"To take a step down from 1 mill to 0.75, we needed to come up with about $203,000, so I went to work on closing that gap. I will say, I was happy to find about $83,000 that we could move around in the budget, and find some room," he said.

Council vice president Mary Fuller said she thought Breish's detailed look was similar to a scene in the 1993 movie Dave, when characters in that film do a similar budget review going line-by-line through the federal budget.

Breish added that he'd continue to look into ways to cut costs and/or add revenues, including creating a short-term loan fund that could support residents' infrastructure fixes on their own property, looking into changes to sidewalk repairs, a proposal from Mayor Garry Herbert to look into supplying public internet access throughout the town, and one of the town's hot-button issues that drew years of discussion in the 2010s.

"We could responsibly revisit single-hauler trash. Maybe there's an opportunity there to help households save some money on costs and expenses," he said.

Doing so allowed council to unanimously pass four more items that council President Denton Burnell said came out of a pre-meeting executive sessions, extending conditional offers of employment to four potential police officer candidates. Herbert and police chief Mike Trail both thanked council for doing so, as both had made the case in recent months for increasing police staffing levels.

"The expansion of our police department is necessary to continue to meet the needs and expectations of our community," Herbert said. "It is our intention to utilize these officers to create a dedicated traffic department, fully focused on managing traffic and traffic-related challenges across the borough."

Lansdale's borough council next meets at 8:30 p.m. on Jan. 4, 2023 at the borough municipal building, 1 Vine Street. For more information visit www.Lansdale.org.

UKRAINE

President back in Kyiv; Russia keeps up attacks

By E. Eduardo Castillo
The Associated Press

KYIV, UKRAINE » Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy sounded another defiant note on his return to his nation's capital Friday following his wartime visit to the United States, saying his forces are "working toward victory" even as Russia warned that there would be no end to the war until it achieves its military aims.

Zelenskyy posted on his Telegram account that he was in his Kyiv office following his U.S. trip that secured a new $1.8 billion military-aid package, and pledged that "we'll overcome everything." Speaking to Ukrainian ambassadors later Friday, Zelenskyy suggested that U.S. lawmakers were preparing another $45 billion financial package "for Ukraine and global security," adding that strategic agreements with Washington would strengthen Kyiv's defense forces in the new year.

He earlier thanked the Netherlands for pledging up to $2.65 billion for 2023 to help pay for military equipment and rebuild critical infrastructure.

Zelenksyy's return came amid relentless Russian artillery, rocket and mortar fire, as well as airstrikes on the eastern and southern fronts and elsewhere in Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the war would end at the negotiating table once the "special military operation" achieves "the goals that the Russian Federation has set," adding that "a significant headway has been made on demilitarization of Ukraine."

The Kremlin spokesman said no reported Ukrainian peace plan can succeed without taking into account "the realities of today that can't be ignored," a reference to Moscow's demand that Ukraine recognize Russia's sovereignty over the Crimean Peninsula, which was annexed in 2014, as well as other territorial gains.

At least six civilians were killed and 18 others were wounded in Russian attacks on eight regions in Ukraine's south and east in the past 24 hours, according to Ukrainian officials.

In a regular Telegram update, the deputy head of Ukraine's presidential office Kyrylo Tymoshenko said Russian missiles destroyed a boarding school in the eastern city of Kramatorsk, home of the Ukrainian army's local headquarters.

The Ukrainian military said Russian forces fired multiple rocket launchers "more than 70 times" across Ukrainian territory overnight, while fierce battles raged around the city of Bakhmut in the eastern Donetsk region.

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www.bbc4Christ.org
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Sunday Bible Study (Church School) 9:00 a.m.
Midweek Bible Study-Wed. 11:00 a.m. & 7:15 p.m.
Pastor Charles W. Quann

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Every Monday, 5:00-6:00 pm
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PRESBYTERIAN
Gwynedd Square Presbyterian, PC(USA)
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215-699-9159
office@gwyneddsquare.org
Sunday Worship 10:00 am
Sunday School at 9:00 am
Youth Fellowship Sundays at 7:00 pm
"Growing Spiritually through Service"
For details and program information
GwyneddSquare.org

Join Us In Prayer

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Lansdale Presbyterian Church
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Hatfield, PA 19440
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www.lansdalepres.org
Sunday School for all ages 9:15 am
Worship Service 10:30 am
Nursery Care is available
Children Ministry, Jr & Sr High Youth Groups
Small Groups, College & Career
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METHODIST
Lansdale United Methodist
300 North Broad Street, Lansdale, PA 19446
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www.lansdaleumc.org
Worship Schedule
Join us online at our website www.lansdaleumc.org each Sunday morning.
Announcements and Music at 8:45 a.m.
Worship at 9:00 a.m.

EPISCOPAL
Church of the Messiah
1001 Dekalb Pike,
Lower Gwynedd, PA 19002
215-699-9204
office@messiahgwynedd.org
www.messiahgwynedd.org
Sundays Holy Eucharist at 8 am & 9:30 am
Nursery Care & Church School begin @ 9:15
(Children join services @ Communion)
Refreshments follow both Services
Wednesday Rector's Study at 11 am & 7 pm

For information about this directory call 215-648-1140 or hpolak@adtaxi.com
Deadlines: Wednesday at 4 p.m.