

# Reflections on the Meaning of Christmas

— Lou Norsetter, Michael Lukens, Michael Vinson, and Phil Hauck —

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## Lou Norsetter

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan, earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone.  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow...

We're here now. Bleak midwinter. Frozen ruts in our driveways. Gray skies dropping lazy snowflakes. Dry cornflower stalks shuddering in a crisp breeze. It certainly is a bleak midwinter.

For many years, I especially looked forward to the New Year. Not for the midnight revelry; rather, seed catalogs. Pictures of blooming flowers in a riot of color, all manner of sizes and shapes. Spring would soon arrive; we could imagine (and order) a better future just around the corner. No longer overcome by winter doldrums; our hope for next year's garden would pull us through our darkened misery.

This year I taught the Advent lesson on hope to our junior youth – the fifth through eighth graders. You remember the verses from Isaiah: “beat their swords into ploughshares,” “spears into pruning hooks,” “neither shall they learn war anymore.” We explored ways we could bring peace at school and in the world. We even learned about a man in Columbia, who converted military rifles strung into guitars. And yes, they sounded like classical guitars!

The fifth verse asks how we might live in hope? Isaiah urges us to “walk in the light of the Lord.” Sheila Klassen-Wiebe, a writer for our Shine Curriculum, suggests we live with the imagination of the future. Let's live with ploughshares instead of swords, pruning hooks instead of spears. Let's live without war. We can live the future by adhering to the ways of peace and justice. Hope need not be wishful thinking of a future we cannot attain. We can live that future right now, “walking in the light of the Lord.”

Last week, our curriculum introduced us to a woman named Peace Pilgrim. In her early years, the 1920s, then Mildred Norman danced the jitterbug and sported the latest flapper dresses. Yet, a call to something higher beckoned her. Legally changing her name, she donned her new uniform – a blue tunic with “Peace Pilgrim” emblazoned on the front as she started a 25,000-mile trek across the United States. Her simple philosophy? “This is the way of peace: overcome evil with good, falsehood with truth, and hatred with love.” She literally walked in the light of the Lord.

Let this be our Christmas hope: Walking in the future right now. Find ways to promote peace, truth and justice. In the words of Peace Pilgrim, “Whenever you bring harmony into any unpeaceful situation, you contribute to the cause of peace.” Greet the stranger, listen to others with whom we may disagree, opt for justice and peace in the smallest and grandest ways.

And don't forget the seed catalogs.

## **Michael Lukens**

Christmas is a time of wonderful memories for so many of us. I was a very young child when we were deep in the midst of World War II. One of the strongest memories for me comes out of that very dark time: the Christmas Eve pageant which was always held late so that it ended at midnight, just as Christmas day began. The sanctuary was ablaze with candles everywhere and the choirs, including the youth choir in which a couple of my siblings sang, and the children's choir in which I sang, processed down the aisles of the large nave, singing marvelous carols framed within majestic organ chords. It was wondrous, even magical. It was a festival of light in the midst of darkness, ever a magical time for a child.

I thought again of these moments just recently when I came across a letter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to his parents the week before Christmas in 1943. I was six, snug and safe in southern Indiana, but conscious that it was a grim and dangerous time. Bonhoeffer was 37, imprisoned in Berlin, facing torture and death. Yet, these are words that he wrote:

I need not tell you how great my longing for freedom and for all of you is. But throughout the decades you have given us such incomparably beautiful Christmases that the grateful remembrance of them is strong enough to make even a darker Christmas radiant. In such times it comes apparent for the first time that it means to possess a past and an inner heritage that is independent of the changes of time and circumstance. The awareness of being borne by a spiritual legacy stretching through centuries gives one the secure feeling of safety in the face of all passing afflictions.

This is still our Christmas center: "an awareness of being borne by a spiritual legacy stretching through the centuries" enfolding us with "the secure feeling of safety in the face of all passing afflictions." Think of all the centuries through which, year after year, churches the world over have celebrated as we do, celebrated with wondrous light, celebrated through music and carols that we know by heart, celebrated in the midst of darkness the coming of a great Hope in a time of such attrition and uncertainty. Some of us are in mourning for a past that seems so lost; some of us are in fear over so much change and challenge that seems unending; some of us are so anxious over instability around us, coming at us in persistent waves, uncertainty of the future: in our families, our communities, the whole society, of the world at large.

Yet, yes yet, Bonhoeffer, a martyr in that season 78 years ago, and we here now on this day recall a legacy over many centuries, that we stand in a continuing tradition of hopefulness, grounded in the Great Hope that is Jesus, in a faithfulness that is wrapped with the birth of an infant and that grows into an understanding of the God who became one of us in a love that supports us in the midst of uncertainty, that encompasses us in the face of affliction. Let us remind ourselves: we are not some sort of fly-by-night, temporary movement, some shallow, passing fancy on shaky footing. We rest secure on an awesome, wondrous foundation, in the bedrock of God's will, celebrating in Christ's birth a legacy of Hope, that in Him a new Light shines in this place and in the whole world.

## **Michael Vinson**

It's well-known in this congregation (and throughout several corners of Green Bay) that my husband loves Christmas. Very specifically – Christmas music. People often ask when the Christmas music starts at our house. After Thanksgiving? After Halloween? When the leaves start to change color in October?

The truth is Christmas music is a year-long phenomenon. “Jingle Bells” in July; “Frosty the Snowman” at bedtime with the kids in May; “O Holy Night” on a random Tuesday in March. In fact, one of the highlights of our wedding reception (which occurred in October) was when the DJ played “All I Want for Christmas is You” on the dance floor.

It's likely less well-known that I share Todd's enthusiasm for Christmas and Christmas music. And while, yes, Christmas is a year-long celebration, it's during Christmastime – this merriest season – that I feel the full effect of what Christmas means to me.

You see, I love rituals. The consecration of a marriage through voicing cherished vows; the painstaking folding of a flag at a state funeral; proclaiming the Bond of Union Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. For me, practicing rituals collapses spacetime, flattening the past and the future into an ever-present, persistent now.

For me, nothing evokes the magic of ritual quite like Christmastime. We bring out the old ornaments. We light new candles. We gather with loved ones. And we turn on Christmas music.

While I love traditional Christmas carols and classic records of holiday tunes, I especially look forward during this time to hearing new recordings and renditions of Christmas songs. These sacred and secular hymns we think we know so well continue to speak new life under the transformational magic of new voices, new perspectives and new approaches. And through that transformation, I find myself better able to unlock new and deeper understandings of what Christmas is about.

An example of this for me is Broadway star Leslie Odom, Jr.'s recording of “The First Noel.” His version from 2017 is a meditative study of the carol that builds to a soaring crescendo of him bellowing out a final, booming Noel that echoes briefly before fading into silence. A silence that is followed by a few seconds of a soft, contemplative piano accompaniment.

For me, this recording is a revelation, especially that ending. In a real way, in that crescendo and attending silence is a place where I can find God. In the stillness. In the unexpected quiet. When the cacophony is over, when everything is said and done – then, there, we find a reminder of the everlasting, omnipresent oneness that is and always will be.

Right there. At the end of a new telling of an ancient Christmas carol.

## **Phil Hauck**

Those of you who know Rita (Baretta) well know that, as well as her vigorous schedule with us this weekend, she has spent the past several weeks as part of a caroling group singing at the Union Hotel. After serenading each table, they would turn and face the room (there are three rooms) and sing, “We wish you a Merry Christmas, we wish you a Merry Christmas, we wish you a Merry Christmas, and a Happy New Year!”

Go back about 65 years, and I was also part of a caroling group for our neighborhood on Christmas Eve, and we would end with the same words: “and a Happy New Year!”

Back then, the new year was fairly placid. Not so today. Today, we are asked to be in isolation...exactly the opposite of what creates both physical and mental health and personal balance. As a result, we haven’t been in church...an active part of this church family...and that’s a personal loss for each one of us.

So, my hope for us in the new year is to return to church...so I guess I’m speaking to those streaming in to this service from home, not to those here in the pews today. I’d like to see us back to the 125 strong we used to have pre-pandemic. And, here are three reasons why it’s both important and healthier for you to be here!

1. One—I learned from a previous pastor that there are three central elements to the church experience. Obviously, worship, where we reinforce our beliefs. And second, outreach, where we practice those beliefs in our daily lives. But also, fellowship, where we interact with each other which feeds our spirit and our sense of self!
2. Two—You will live a longer, healthier life! There are two parts to this.

First part: Ever hear of Blue Zones, those five places in the world where there’s the highest percentage of centenarians? There are nine common elements between them, including these four:

1. Having a purpose in your daily life...having a why!
2. Being part of a faith-based community: Us! Get this: It adds four to 14 years to your life!
3. Being part of a ‘tribe’ – having close friends and strong social networks of people who care about you and whom you care about. Some of your tribe members are here at Union Church.
4. Having close and strong family connections.

Second part: There’s a recent study by a university researcher looking at what most influences the ability to live a long life. Most influences. Obviously, it included good nutrition and exercise and other factors you might expect. But it showed that...by far...the biggest influence to living a long life is social relationships. First of all, close relationships...those friends and family. You can have about 12 close relationships.

But just as important is your ‘social’ integration...relating to the people who cross your path every day. Do you talk to the post person, the checkout person, the neighbor walking the dog, or the person making your coffee? Do you initiate opportunities...that book club or bridge club or [and Barbara (McClure-Lukens) you owe me for this one] the Lifelong Learning Center at UWGB which she helped to found?

3. Three—Finally, sociologists say we are products of the groups with which we choose to associate, ones that seem to support how we want to engage and live. Then, we use these group involvements to reinforce and comfort. We become who they are...and they become who we are.

So, that’s it! By coming back to church you are:

- Creating a longer life for yourself.
- Helping to make our congregation stronger in accomplishing what we are trying to do together.
- Reinforcing the beliefs integral to how you want to live your life.

I look forward to visiting with you here next Sunday!

### Sources

#### Lou Norsetter

“In the Bleak Midwinter,” Christina G. Rossetti, 1872. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, The New Century Hymnal, 1995., Hymn 128.

“Peace Pilgrim,” Shine Curriculum: Meet Jesus, the Messiah,” Junior Youth, Winter 2021-2022, Teachers’ Guide, Session 2, p. 16.

Quest, Junior Youth Devotional, Winter 2021-2022. Part of Shine Curriculum.

- Escopetarra, p. 4. (Escape = rifle in Spanish; guitarra = guitar; escopetarra = rifle-guitar)
- Peace Pilgrim, p. 6.

#### Michael Lukens

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, v. 8.225.