

# Silent night, holy night

## Christmas messages from local pastors

### All Saints Episcopal and Hope Lutheran churches

*"May your hopes and fears be met in Christ"*

*"O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie;*

*Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.*

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.*

*The hopes and fears of the all years are met in thee tonight."*

Phillips Brooks was an Episcopalian bishop who wrote this carol while he was the priest of Trinity Episcopal Church in Boston. As an Episcopalian pastor, I am not to sing carols until Christmas Eve, yet I have found myself quietly humming this carol as the snow falls around Heppner. We are, in a sense, a lot like Bethlehem. We have fields of grain, cattle and sheep and plenty of barns around our landscape. We have a motel that is often full. We are snuggled in this valley, coated with inch upon inch of snow and awaiting that night when all the mystery and wonder of the Christ Child comes to life. Where will Mary and Joseph and the Christ Child find room this year?

As I shopped in the grocery store or visited with parishioners at church, I have heard questions about whether loved ones will make it home for Christmas and see the mist of tears in some people's eyes. Christmas can be the most joyous of times and, for some, the loneliest of times. Disappointment for postponed dinners and fear for those traveling icy roads may sometimes try to diminish the joy of this season.

Yet, "in our dark streets shineth an everlasting light..." and we find the One who came to earth 2000 years ago to be with us. That is what "Emmanuel" means...God with us. He does bring joy in our hearts in different ways. The laughter of a child who hangs an ornament whether at home or in your church, sensing the melting of hardened hearts that have been hurt by disappointments, or the shoveling of snow by a neighborhood angel who shows up unannounced... these are all the Christmas miracles that we see.

How are hopes and dreams met this Christmas?

I would say they are met in the person of Jesus Christ who not only loves, forgives and restores us...no matter what! He understands that our hopes and dreams are sometimes anchored in traditions. May our anchor this Christmas be the presence of God with us, the Christ of Christmas.

For "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." May you find your hopes and fears met in Christ this Christmas! For with it comes joy and peace that can never be diminished! Worship, praise, laugh and love...bring the joy of Christmas into the world in a new way! Christ is born! Alleluia!

### Heppner United Methodist Church

I want to wish everyone in South Morrow County a merry Christmas. It is my hope that during this Christmas season, each one of us will experience the reason for the season. Unlike the world of retail trade in which Christmas ends on December 25, in the Christian calendar, the season of Christmas extends from December 25-on which we celebrate the birth of Jesus and the shepherds' worship of Him-until January 6, on which we celebrate the coming of the wise men, the first to bring Christmas presents.

There were times when our children were in their formative years, that Dorine and I were, like many parents, dumbfounded that our children, for whatever reason, evidently did not understand the messages we were trying to convey to them. At those times, we wished that we could have somehow gotten into their minds-entered their "world"-in order to communicate with them more fully.

From the creation of humankind, our Creator (who is known to some as higher power, supreme being, Jehovah, YHWH, Allah, Our Father, God), tried to communicate to humans God's desire that God wanted us to love one another as God loves us. (Because I believe that God is inclusive, I will not be using gender specific pronouns in place of God.) God's love was unconditional and inclusive. In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament in the Bible), we read how God conveyed this message of love directly to some and indirectly to others through the prophets. Unfortunately, the Hebrews considered God's love to be just for them and they interpreted God's message of love to be a call to exclude themselves from non-believers and even fellow Jews, whom the religious leaders deemed not to be "pure" enough to enter the Temple (church) to worship.

Wanting to communicate directly with humans, God

sent God's Son to show us how to live the love of God. During Christmas, Christians celebrate the coming of the Son of God, Jesus, into the physical world. In the Christian Scriptures (New Testament in the Bible) in the Gospel according to Luke chapter 2, we are told that in the region of Bethlehem, there were shepherds out in the field tending their sheep. Then a host of angels appeared to them and announced to them that in Bethlehem, the city of David, a Savior had been born, and the angels told them how to find this baby.

I believe that it is safe to assume that these shepherds were of the Jewish faith, but, because they spent all of their time tending sheep, killing wild animals to protect the sheep and disposing of sheep who died, thus making them "unclean" in the eyes of the religious leaders and because they were unable to observe ritual washing practices, they would not be allowed to enter the Temple to worship on a regular basis. Thus they were looked down upon by the religious leaders of their community. Although they were not valued by their own religious leaders, they were evidently valued by God for it was to them that the birth of Jesus was first revealed. And then in the Gospel according to Matthew chapter two, we are told that God later led alien non-Jewish wise men to Bethlehem to worship the birth of Jesus. In His adulthood, Jesus was also revealed to the Jews and Jewish leaders to be the Son of God.

Thus, everyone has reason to celebrate the coming of Jesus into the physical world we know. At Christmas, we celebrate the Good News that God's love is unconditional, inclusive and everlasting and that we are challenged to love others as God loves us.

It is my hope that Jesus will be born anew in the heart and soul of each person who is reading this message, so that God might reveal to you God's love for you and so that you might share God's love with others.

Come celebrate the birth of Jesus with us on Christmas Eve. We will have services at 7 p.m. featuring a choir cantata and at 11 p.m. with carols. Everyone-believers, seekers, ones seeking a sense of community, or a warm place to spend an hour-are welcome.

-Pastor Jonathan Enz

### Valby Lutheran Church

*"Where do we find the light we need?"*

In these darkest days of the year--when daylight is brief, the economic news is not good, and terrorists remain at large around the globe--light is a precious commodity. Where to find the light we need? Where to find hope?

At Christmas, we celebrate God's great interruption into the world as we were running it...the world God had created as good and orderly, but we defiled with selfishness

and pride. Who would have thought that a helpless baby would grow up to be our Savior, the conqueror of darkness, of sin and death? We have hope, thanks to this infant, and a light that can never be extinguished has been cast into our future.

Get down on your knees and look closely at the Christ Child in the manger. Find light. Find hope, all wrapped up in one tidy parcel.

In Thy light, we see light. Psalm 36:9

-Pastor Katy Anderson

### St. Patrick's and St. William's Catholic Churches

*"2009: A time to look up and hope"*

As 2008 comes to a thundering conclusion, it is time to look up and hope. Christmas is a feast of hope. There is an old saying that hope springs eternal. So Christmas is a feast that causes us to look up and hope. For those of us who believe that Jesus Christ is the Savior, celebrating His birth is a feast of hope. Hope is that virtue that is like water that flows through a sieve; it is like the fire that moves through wood. Hope moves through difficulties, and come out smiling.

We need hope in a world that is facing economic crisis. We need hope as we face the collapse of monumental institutions. We need hope as we witness the decay of integrity.

In the midst of concern and confusion, we can hear again the message of the angels: "Peace on earth to men of goodwill for unto you is born a Savior." We can marvel again at the Magi who, in their wisdom, traveled far, found the Savior, and worshipped Him.

This is a time to hope that man's inhumanity to man may be replaced with understanding and compassion.

This is a time to hope that the celebration of the birth of the Savior will inspire many to reach for moral integrity.

This is the time to hope that truth and justice will again become the standards of life.

This is a time to hope that each of us can travel through the vicissitudes of life and worship that Savior.

This is a time to hope that we can soon hear a message of permanent peace around our world.

This is a time to hope that 2009 will be a year in which many will look to Jesus and be inspired to greatness.

-Fr. Gerry Condon

### Willow Creek Baptist Church "Party Hearty Incarnationally"

I must admit that I used to be a bit of a Scrooge when it came to Christmas. For me it was too much stuff added to a "to do" list in an already too busy life. There was very little joy in the celebration. I did enjoy buying gifts for others, but mostly I just wanted the whole season to get over with so I could cross it off "my list." I remembered the joy and wonder of the Christmas celebrations of my youth, but it was mostly lost in the haze of memory. But, that has changed for me in recent years.

Now, Christmas celebrations are not without some controversy and some refuse to celebrate Christmas for different reasons. Some see Christmas as "too religious" and do not want to see decorations that include any religious symbols or hear their local store clerk say "merry Christmas."

Still, some see Christmas as "too pagan." They point to the origin of the Christmas celebration and the use of the symbols like Christmas trees and their supposed ties to pagan worship. They would say that when we sing "noel" we are actually saying "no-el" with the word "el" being the Hebrew word for God (actually, "noel" is a French word for the nativity.) My favorite comment that I have heard is "when you rearrange the letters of the word "Santa" you get "Satan" (actually the word "santa" is related to the word "saint" and someone needs a rearrangement of their... never mind). A third group would rather not celebrate Christmas because they are just too busy. Christmas just adds another busy thing in an already too busy life. Bah humbug...

I understand these positions and maybe have some empathy for them. But, I do not think that our problem is that we celebrate Christmas. I think that the problem is that we do not celebrate Christmas well. But, before we talk of our Christmas celebrations, let's take a brief look into the history of the Christmas holiday and maybe through that we can get some insight into how to celebrate Christmas well.

The date of Jesus birth is not mentioned in the Bible and is not known. Some traditions have suggested a December 25<sup>th</sup> date, but the best information places Jesus' birth in the spring. The December 25<sup>th</sup> date began to get support in the middle ages as the church fathers were looking for a substitute for the pagan festival Saturnalia that was held around the winter solstice. Saturnalia was a festival in which all morality was thrown off and included such things as carolers... drunk, naked carolers. But even with the religious substitution the Christmas celebration was pretty rowdy. The reformers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century did not like the celebration, too much drunkenness. Christmas was banned in England for a time. Here in the U.S. the puritans denounced Christmas and

some states in early U.S. history outlawed it. But, still the celebrations persisted and came back even stronger in western history largely in part to the writings of Charles Dickens.

The church fathers in the middle ages were also looking for ways to battle the Gnostic and Arian heresies. Without getting into a long theological discourse on what these heresies entail, suffice to say that Christmas, the celebration of the incarnation, Jesus coming as fully God and fully man helped to remind and reinforce the people against these heresies. Jesus was God incarnate who has come for our salvation and redemption of the world. I probably cannot overstate the importance of this, but I do not want to get into a long discussion of theology.

Now, just because a celebration or practice is not mentioned in the Bible, does not mean it is anti-Bible. Christmas is a post-biblical festival, but it is not an anti-biblical festival. For example, the Jewish celebrations of Hanukah and Purim are in this category. More simply, the Bible does not mention driving automobiles either, but that doesn't make driving them anti-biblical. In fact, I believe that God enjoys a good celebration. You cannot read the Bible, especially the Torah and see it any other way. I challenge you to read Deuteronomy 14:22-26 and note that command to celebrate. The problem is not that we celebrate; the problem is the focus of our celebration.

What about the use of all of those pagan symbols, like Christmas trees? Idols are nothing, unless you worship them. The problem is that many Christians see them as magical as if they contain some special power. This is not a Christian view, it is a magical view and Christians need to quit being afraid of the "dark." Symbols are related to content and context. For example, most Christians would see the cross as a symbol of love, but others in the world would see it as a symbol of hypocrisy, death and persecution. The six pointed "star of David" was also used in Hindu occult practices. The five pointed pentagram is associated with Satan, yet there are 50 of them on the American flag. In Acts 20 Paul uses a pagan idol and quotes a Greek playwright to share the gospel of God.

The symbols in our houses like Christmas trees are not an issue unless you bow down and worship it. I think we in America are more apt to bow down at the altar of mammon (wealth) called the shopping mall, than we are to a Christmas tree. In fact a Christmas tree can be a great tool to point to God. We can talk of living waters, vine and branches, the bright and morning star, I am the light of the world and the glory of God lighting the world in Rev 21-22 to name a few.

So how can we celebrate Christmas and do it well? How did I rekindle the wonder of the Christmas celebration? I learned to "party hearty incarnation-ally." We need to live and celebrate "Immanuel, God with us" and all that this

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**Taylor's Restaurant**

Will be closed from  
5 p.m. December 21 to  
8 a.m. December 27  
**Have a Merry Christmas!**



 **HEPPNER ELKS 358**  
676-9181 "Where Friends Meet" 142 North Main

**New Year's Eve!**  
**- Wednesday, December 31st -**  
**Crab & Beef Feed**