

# Many First Noëls

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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*Southern Point Lights (Christmas Eve) © 2021 Rod E.S.Q.*

As the story has been handed down to us, the First Noël – the first Christmas – was a very unexpected event... it just didn't go as planned. There were some tedious travel arrangements related to bureaucracy; the accommodations were... not as expected; it looks like there were some surprise guests; and there were ongoing hazards that kept folks anxious. On the plus side, it looked like there was some gift exchange, and people still took time to look out into the night sky in awe.

And, in any case, it did rather make for a good story – we're still telling it about two thousand years later!

We've all had Christmases that didn't go as expected, with last-minute travel plans – or travel cancelations; accommodation situations that were sparse or improvised; surprise guests or surprise no-shows; unexpected hazards; gifts that were not what we expected; or that weren't received the way we'd hope.

Each of these will have been the first Noël of their kind. When Christmas went differently than what had been the accepted or expected tradition. Some of these will have been one-of-a-kind events, though occasionally, some of these traditions will have kept on afterward.

Hundreds of years ago, there was a first Noël to be celebrated on December 25, after decades of debate on the date (the original story was vague on that kind of detail). At some point, there was a first Noël that included Yule traditions, with tree and ornaments. Then came first Noëls with roast birds and side dishes that for many have become *de rigueur*, even if it hadn't been tradition before. Just over 100 years ago, in the fields of France, Belgium, and Germany, soldiers had a first Noël singing carols and playing soccer with mortal enemies, over no-man's land, having an unexpectedly silent night under the stars of the European sky.

Many of you will have had a first Noël that became what Christmas was supposed to be like, a first Noël with particular music, stories, or other rituals that tell you that Christmas has happened. And later, other first Noëls came around that were different... not quite what you expected.

Some of these may have been welcome surprises... and others may have been awful disappointments at the time, perhaps even traumatic.

Perhaps after some time has passed, some of these unexpected Christmases might have become must-tell stories among family and friends, congenially recalling past events with a hint of embarrassment, but more than a balance of fondness for the shared experience. Others may remain stories full of regret.

This year, it is quite likely that Christmas was not quite what was planned. Last year was our first Noël without the use of our building in over 100 years. This year was our first Noël with... mixed accommodations. And the Noël via videophone has now become a bit

of an annual tradition... at least for now. We have faith that there will be an upcoming first Noël where the videophone will be a welcome option only, rather than a requirement.

Some of these may become stories of regret, and some may even be fond memories. What remains for sure, is that we continue to offer the best of ourselves to each other, whatever gifts we have to offer one another, receiving whatever gifts others have to offer us, and spending time with each other – however we may be present – amid a starry night.

So may it be,  
In the Spirit of the Season,  
Amen

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*Suggested Carols:*

**#237 The First Nowell**

Words: English carol

Music: William Sandys's *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern*, 1833,  
harmony by John Stainer, 1840-1901

THE FIRST NOWELL

**#244 It Came upon the Midnight Clear**

~)-| Words: Edmund Hamilton Sears, 1810-1876

Music: Richard Storrs Willis, 1819-1900

CAROL

**#238 Within the Shining of a Star**

~)-| Words: Robert S. Lehman, 1913-

~)-| Music: Betsy Jo Angebrannt, 1931- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

CHRISTMAS HYMN