

## UUO Sunday Service for December 17, 2023

Prelude music, played by Toni Janik: **Silent Night**

**Welcome** all to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda Our church, our community seeks to accept you as you are, honouring who you are, respecting who you love, and celebrating your presence with us in this space.

Here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, we are bound together by our common mission to proclaim the good news, that faith, hope, and love, are accessible to all humanity – unconditionally – and this a legacy from our Universalist heritage. My name is Bill Baylis, and I am your service leader and speaker today. Our service would not be possible without the support of a tech team to resolve unanticipated technical quitches (as you may unfortunately witness!). Thanks to on-site techs Ray Stone and Sue Markham and to off-site ones Stuart Miller and Bobbye Baylis.

[Remind everyone about the ongoing risk of online and telephone scams: Never share any information about money, banking, login information, or personal information over the phone or online. The only exception to this is if the person you're sharing with is someone you trust and that you've known for years. No one from the church will ask you for money with urgency over the phone or online]

Are there any announcements? [Invite participants to Unmute themselves] Announcements...

This is the last Sunday service before the Winter solstice in the northern hemisphere, when the path of the sun is hidden below the horizon. Of course, this was the reason for winter celebrations and fires even in pre-Christian times, made to encourage the sun to return to warm the Earth and light up the heavens. To be sure, there was no scientific proof that celebrations on Earth could change the path of the sun, but the Druids and others had been practising this for years and it always worked: after winter solstice if appropriately celebrated, days become warmer and sunnier, so you needed to continue with the tradition and not tempt fate by abstaining. The celebration, you see, was not just for fun, it was an existential obligation!

There are many global joys and concerns, and we will discuss some of these obliquely in this service. But there are also local ones that are very important. I want mention and thank Ray Stone for help getting to the hospital in Windsor (and returning me a few days later!) this past week, and I now invite you to share other ones. Please unmute if from home or come to the microphone if you are here in church. (Carol Hylton to reflect on Carabel Ringrose's death yesterday morning, following Buster's/Hector's death just over a month ago). We fondly remember Carabel's many years of playing piano music, often accompanied by percussion on spoons by her husband Hector/Buster.

Thank you, Toni, for opening the service with that most iconic and beloved of Christmas carols, Silent Night. It's an appropriate carol and meditation hymn. It is actually the first of two carols of peace in a time of war that we feature today. According to musicologist

Sarah Eyerly of Florida State University, its history goes back to 1816, when—just after the end of the Napoleonic wars, its lyrics were first written down by the young priest **Joseph Mohr** in a small Austrian town Mariapfarr near Salzburg. In 1817, Mohr transferred from Mariapfarr to the parish of St. Nicholas (a good Christmas name!) in the town of Oberndorf, just a few km north of Salzburg in what is now Austria. The parishioners there were largely boat people who ferried salt around the Holy Roman Empire. But Mohr's parishioners in the town were reeling after twelve years of war that had decimated the country's political and social infrastructure, and just one year after the eruption of Indonesia's Mount Tambora, whose massive amount of ash thrown into the upper atmosphere caused crop failures and famine around the world and created what was called "The Year without Summer". Mohr wrote 6 verses and wanted his organist friend and choir director **Franz Gruber** to set them to music for use in the Christmas mass on Christmas Eve, the very next day. The situation became really serious when, according to some accounts, flooding of the river Salzach, which looped around the church, put the church organ out of business.

What to do? Well, Mohr asked Gruber to score the music for choir and two soloists with guitar accompaniment. Mohr would play guitar and he and Gruber could sing the solo parts. Now in spite of his history of being born an illegitimate child, Mohr was popular among his parishioners, and the performance of *Stille Nacht* in 1818 was well received and regarded as a miracle. Nevertheless, it took the better part of a century for it to become well known and adopted world wide. Gruber had written his music in a lilting 6/8 meter to simulate rolling waves, with each beat subdivided into 3's, similar to "Blue Boat Home" but slower. We will postpone singing *Silent Night* until Christmas Eve, next Sunday.

You may also know the story of another "miracle" about *Silent Night*, when it was sung during a brief impromptu truce in the close-range fighting of World War I on Christmas Eve 1914. It was largely an initiative of soldiers from the opposing sides from German Saxony and Britain who laid down their guns, crawled out of their muddy trenches, and sang *Stille Nacht*--and even exchanging some gifts, cigarettes, drinks and food. It is a carol of peace in a time of war, and that is a theme of this service to which we will return later when we discuss another well-known Unitarian carol. *Silent Night* is often sung on Christmas Eve, and we will sing it at the Christmas Eve Matins service next Sunday morning.

In his book on the Christmas truce, historian Stanley Weintraub identified the singer in 1914 as Walter Kirchhoff, a German Officer and sometime member of the Berlin Opera. Kirchhoff's singing of the carol in both German and English is credited with encouraging the exchange of songs, greetings and gifts between the opposing soldiers. While there is debate among historians about the nature and scope of the Christmas Eve truce, *Silent night* is firmly established in popular imagination as the soundtrack for this remarkable event..

The contrast between the carol's message of tranquillity and hope and the violence of war is obvious and compelling, but the intimacy and simplicity of Gruber's music is important, too, in providing an antidote to the grimness of short-range trench warfare.

The depth of significance attached to *Silent Night* is summed up its inclusion on UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list in 2011. Words, music and contextual narratives combine to create its aura and reputation, making it one of the most striking examples of the ways in which musical associations shape our experiences of the Christmas season.

Before we let *Silent Night* (or *Stille Nacht* in German) lull us to sleep, we'll ask Dan Janik light the chalice for us as we celebrate with an energetic song of Advent, namely with **Let Christmas Come, #224** in our hymnal. Its delicate lyrics are by Unitarian minister Dr. John Hanly Morgan (1918-2018), who served as minister in Flint, Michigan; as well as in South Bend, Indiana; Charlotte, NC; and Toronto, ON. As described in the companion volume to our hymnal, **Notes from the Far Fringe** by Kimberley Debus, this Advent carol is "a sweet invitation, gentle as the falling snow, inviting serenity and love." Note that the carol ends not on the home or tonic chord, but on the dominant 5th. This seems appropriate for an Advent tune that anticipates a future event that will realize its resolution. Its setting is perfect: this Ralph Vaughan Williams tune ends in anticipation, without resolving its final chord to the tonic. It holds open musically the thoughts that Morgan's lyrics hold – that something beautiful, gentle, and meaningful is coming, so wait for it.... We follow Morgan's advent piece with a lighting first of our chalice and then of our Advent wreath as we sing verse 3 of **#225 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**.

Let's turn now to a couple of other Christmas carols by Unitarians that are popular at this time of year, starting with **#244 It Came upon the Midnight Clear**, written by Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears in 1849. Let me first give you some background information about the author, Unitarian minister Sears.

#### **Rev. Edmund Hamilton Sears, Unitarian Minister**

Edmund Hamilton Sears (April 6, 1810-January 16, 1876), a Unitarian parish minister and author, was understood in his day to be conservative and not in sympathy with either "broad church" Unitarians or "radical" Unitarians. He wrote a number of theological works influential among liberal Protestants, inside and outside the Unitarian fold. Sears's fame is due to his composition of the quintessentially Unitarian Christmas carol, "It Came upon the Midnight Clear."

The youngest of three sons of Joseph and Lucy (Smith) Sears, Edmund grew up on a farm within sight of the Berkshire Hills, in Sandisfield, Massachusetts. He told his friend and colleague, Chandler Robbins, that as a child he had fancied the hilltops to rise up near heaven, where "bright-robed messengers alighted and rested, as they came and went on their errands of love."

From his father, Edmund learned to love poetry. He wrote that as a child, “[w]hen at work, some poem was always singing through my brain.” From both parents he was also taught the importance of moral duty. Though they encouraged his love of study, the burden of farm labor prevented regular school attendance. Yet in 1831 his education was advanced enough for his admission as a sophomore at Union College in Schenectady, New York. He won a college prize for his poetry.

Upon graduation, Sears studied law for nine months and then taught at Brattleboro Academy in Vermont, and soon began to study for the ministry under Addison Brown, minister of the Unitarian Church in Brattleboro. Attracted by the writings of Boston divines [William Ellery Channing](#) and Henry Ware, Sears went on to study at the Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1834-37. He did student preaching in Barnstable, Massachusetts, where he met Ellen Bacon. They married in 1839.

In the meantime the American Unitarian Association supported Sears’s work as a missionary in the frontier area around—ready for this?— Toledo, Ohio. In late 1838 he supplied the pulpit for the First Congregational Church and Society in Wayland, Massachusetts. Impressed by his character and his preaching, the church extended a call to settle with them. He accepted, and the church ordained and installed him as minister in February, 1839. Many years later, Sears explained that he had never been ambitious for a large city pulpit or for the prominence of such a position. Rather, he was drawn by “the quiet beauty of Wayland with its sylvan life and little parish.”

Though he found Wayland pleasing, Sears learned that to provide for his family he needed to serve a larger, more prosperous church. His successful ministry at the Congregational Church in Lancaster, 1840-47, however, was cut short by illness and depression. Unable afterwards to preach in a voice loud enough to be heard by a large congregation (and of course there were no electronic amplifiers or microphones back then!) or to sustain the heavy work of a large parish, Sears returned to Wayland for a year of rest and recovery. When his health had improved, he was recalled to the Wayland ministry and served there for an additional 17 years, from 1848 to 1865. With a lighter workload he spent much of his time writing. In all, he wrote over 500 hymns.

As a student in 1834, Sears had written a Christmas carol, “Calm on the Listening Ear of Night,” his lyrics describing the mystical moment when the angels’ anthem burst upon the silent hills and plains of Palestine. It was printed in many American hymnals. But it was his carol, “It Came upon the Midnight Clear,” first performed in Wayland in 1849, that achieved lasting popularity. It was

published in the *Christian Register* in 1850. Richard Storrs Willis, who studied music in Europe under Felix Mendelssohn, originally wrote the music associated with the carol for a different hymn, but its pairing with Sears' lyrics for "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" seemed inspired. The publisher of the *Christian Register* where the hymn first appeared, who was also a clergyman, later wrote that "I always feel that however poor my Christmas sermon may be, the reading and singing of this hymn are enough to make up for all deficiencies." Writing during a period of personal melancholy, and with news of revolution in Europe and the war of the United States with Mexico fresh in his mind, Sears portrayed the world as dark, full of "sin and strife," and not hearing the Christmas message. There are 5 verses although verse 3 or 4 is often omitted.

Our hymnal gives us only 4. My well-worn International book of Christmas Carols also gives 4, but not the same 4! Verse 3 is different. So we have all 5 verses if we can determine the correct order! Wikipedia to the rescue: our hymnal omits verse 4 and my carol book omits verse 3. Both verses are needed to fully capture Sears' sadness about a world at war. Let's sing all five, using the Richard Storrs Willis tune from 1850. We'll project the 5 verses and there are also a few printed copies if you want them:

## Lyrics[\[edit\]](#)

---

The full song comprises five stanzas. Some versions, including the [United Methodist Hymnal](#)<sup>[4]</sup> and [Lutheran Book of Worship](#),<sup>[5]</sup> omit verse three, while others (including *The Hymnal 1982*) omit verse four.<sup>[6]</sup> Several variations also exist to Sears' original lyrics.

1. It came upon the [midnight](#) clear,  
That glorious song of old,  
From [angels](#) bending near the earth  
To touch their [harps](#) of gold;  
"Peace on the earth, good will to men  
From heaven's all-gracious King" –  
The world in solemn stillness lay  
To hear the angels sing.
2. Still through the cloven skies they come  
With peaceful wings unfurled,  
And still their heavenly music floats  
O'er all the weary world;  
Above its sad and lowly plains  
They bend on hovering wing,  
And ever o'er its [Babel-sounds](#)  
The blessed angels sing.
3. But with the woes of sin and strife  
The world has suffered long;  
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled  
Two thousand years of wrong;  
And man, at war with man, hears not

The love-song which they bring; –  
Oh hush the noise, ye men of strife,  
And hear the angels sing!

4. And ye, beneath life's crushing load,  
Whose forms are bending low,  
Who toil along the climbing way  
With painful steps and slow,  
Look now! for glad and golden hours  
Come swiftly on the wing; –  
Oh, rest beside the weary road  
And hear the angels sing!

5. For [lo!](#) the days are [hastening](#) on  
By prophet bards foretold,  
When with the ever circling years  
Comes round the age of gold;  
When Peace shall over all the earth  
Its ancient splendors fling,  
And the whole world give back the song  
Which now the angels sing.

—Sears, Edmund H. (*Edmund Hamilton*), *Sermons and Songs of Christian Life*, pp. 17-18, *Library of Congress. The Internet Archive*.

The tune used to sing the carol in Canada and the USA is different from the one popular in Europe. In England and much of Europe, an old English melody as arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams is more commonly used. Perhaps Toni can play that melody through, and we can then try singing the first verse using its tune.

**#244 It Came upon the Midnight Clear**, verse 1 only, but sung to English tune arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Does the melody shift our interpretation of the lyrics? I think it's certainly possible.

And now it is time to end the service. As our closing Hymn I've chosen a carol by another famous Unitarian author:

**#240 I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day**, 5 (of 7) verses from **Unitarian Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (27Feb1807-24March1882)**. The carol was written after his oldest son was seriously injured in a civil-war battle, and it is sung to a tune of John Baptiste Calkin (1872), which had been written for an entirely different song.

Thank you for attending the service. I hope my talk has illustrated some of the interesting events and history captured by our Christmas carols. With Dan Janik's help, we will now extinguish the chalice. Please join us for coffee and munchies as Toni Janik plays **What Child is This?** as set to the tune of a 17<sup>th</sup> c. English air arranged by John Stainer (1840-1901), an organist and professor of music at Oxford who was known for raising the standard of English church music.