

The Bell Tower

Newsletter of the First Congregational Church of Hatfield, UCC

2023

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The Christmas Prequels

There are a lot of prequels out there. When a story of some sort gets traction and takes off, and an audience gathers, they tend to ask where it all began. The audience has become invested in characters and they want to know the untold stories of how they came to be the people they know.

Biblical scholars consider the Christmas stories to be prequels. You'll find nothing of the Christmas stories in the Epistles. They are not there in the last written canonical Gospel, John's. And the earliest Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, begins with Jesus as an adult heading out to the Judean desert to be baptized by John the Baptist.

And Mark begins his story of Jesus by writing, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (1:1) For Mark, literally, the beginning is the start of Jesus' public ministry. Anything before that is akin to asking what there was before the Big Bang. For Mark, the prequel questions have not yet been asked or imagined.

Add about a decade to Christianity's timeline and there has been enough time for believers to become interested in the Jesus before He went public.

Scholars postulate that the original form of Luke's Gospel began at 3:1. This explains the detailed chronological setting as Luke tells the story of John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism – just like Mark did at the beginning of his Gospel.

This leaves them to teach that the first two chapters are a later prequel added onto the original Luke, that they were added after Luke's Gospel had been written, and this is where we find one of the two distinctive and irreconcilable Christmas stories.

In Luke, the Holy Family must travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Jesus is born in a manger and we gather for Christmas Eve worship because the angels announce His birth to shepherds "keeping watch over their flock by night" (2:8) They remain in Bethlehem for at least 40 days to account for Jesus' presentation in the Temple,

and then they return "to their own town of Nazareth." (2:39)

Matthew has no story of traveling from Nazareth, no manger, no shepherds nor angelic chorus. Matthew has the Magi of indeterminate number and the Bethlehem star leading them to Jesus' "house." (2:11) This account gives the impression of more permanence than that of the Lucan travelers. Jesus is born in Bethlehem because Joseph and Mary are from Bethlehem.

Rather than go back home to Nazareth after 40 days, as in Luke, Matthew tells of the Holy Family fleeing into Egypt for an extended period of time until after Herod dies. Then, discovering that Herod's son is on the throne, they decide it's not safe to remain in Bethlehem so they seek protection in the distant, unfamiliar village of Nazareth.

What we have here are two different stories of Jesus' birth and childhood. Biblical scholars call such accounts legends. They need not be made out of whole cloth. They knit together inherited, authentic, meaningful traditions in ways that make sense. They share these legends not as historical fact, but as vehicles to teach lessons.

The Christmas prequels emphasize the humanity of Jesus. Shortly after His life, some believers were so affronted by Jesus' crucifixion that they taught His human nature was all an illusion. The Christmas stories emphasize Jesus' real human nature. Jesus is one of us for all of us.

The extraordinary nature of Jesus is also trumpeted, this through angels and heavenly phenomenon. Even so, Jesus comes for the humble, the poor, the ordinary by being born in an animal's barn in one story and by fleeing worldly powers in the other.

We do not know the particulars of Jesus' birth and childhood, but we can believe in the message of these inspired legends, these prequels, that Jesus' birth as the "Son of God" (Mark 1:1) was ordinary and that is unabashedly extraordinary. He is Immanuel, "God with us."

DECEMBER EVENTS

Sat. 2 nd	Christmas Bazaar and Craft Fair from 8:30am – 2:00pm.
Sun. 3 rd	First Sunday of Advent, lighting of the Advent Wreath begins.
Mon 4 th	Online <i>Exploring the Bible</i> study group from 7 – 8:00pm.
Tue. 5 th	Rev. Randy will attend the monthly meeting of the Association Committee on Ministry at 5:45pm.
Tue. 12 th	Rev. Randy will attend the Hampshire Clergy Gathering from 12 – 1:00pm in Hadley.
Wed. 13 th	Monthly meeting of the Board of Trustees at 7:00pm.
Mon. 18 th	Online <i>Exploring the Bible</i> study group from 7 – 8:00pm.
Sat. 23 rd	Luminarium Concert from 4:30 – 5:30pm.
Sun. 24 th	Christmas Fund Offering accepted at the 9:30am Service. Christmas Eve Service begins at 7:30pm.
Tue. 26 th	Monthly meeting of the Board of Deacons at 6:00pm.
Sun. 31 st	New Year’s Eve. Please be safe in your celebrations.

REGULAR GATHERINGS

Sundays: Worship Service begins at 9:30am online and in person. Sunday School begins after the children’s sermon during the worship Service.

Sundays: The Joyful Ringers Bell Choir rehearses from 1-2:00pm.

Tuesdays: Yoga classes are offered every Tuesday in the church parlor at 5:30pm.

Thursdays: Choir rehearses in the parlor at 7:00pm, except July and August.

CHRISTMAS BAZAAR AND CRAFT FAIR

This annual holiday event will take place on Saturday, December 2nd from 8:30am – 2:00pm. If you can help by sharing a craft or by bringing in some of your kitchen specialties, what a help that would be. Would you be able to make and donate a gift basket or maybe some gift cards, those are popular items. Do you have jewelry you no longer wear or do you have knitted crafts, others are looking for such things. What about wreaths or Christmas trees, sleds or skates, outdoor decorations, all of these can be sold. This is an important fundraiser that benefits our church and whatever you can do it is appreciated.

Also our thanks to those who gathered after Sunday worship to work on crafts for this event. Here are a few pictures to share:



SEASON OF ADVENT

The Season of Advent begins on December 3rd and this year it actually concludes on Christmas Eve morning. Its four Sundays represent the putative 4,000 years that the world awaited the Messiah’s birth from Adam to Jesus.



Similarly, we wait during Advent and prepare ourselves to celebrate the joyous mystery of Christmas. On the four Advent Sundays, we will light the candles of the Advent Wreath. They represent the Advent themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love, in that order. The symbol of the Advent Wreath’s increasing light reminds us that the Light of the World is coming to us on Christmas.

Advent’s waiting is not simply biding time. Advent is a period of spiritual preparations. We are to focus on preparing our souls to be the new mangers for the coming Christ Child. The other preparations for Christmas began long before Advent’s first Sunday, and they can become all-consuming. However, they can also be a distraction. They focus our attention on Christmas preparations that are important and joyous, but may have nothing to do with the Christ Child. Advent seeks

to give us the place and time to ponder the mystery of the Incarnation, of God entering the world in the reality of a humble, human child, of God entering the world as one of us for all of us.

I do hope that you will join us for Advent worship as part of your Christmas preparations. And as the baby Jesus came for all people, please think about sharing an invitation with those you know who may not be active church folk so that they too can join us at worship because the gift of Jesus is meant to be shared broadly.

ADVENT BULLETINS

We use coloured bulletin covers for the Advent Sundays and Christmas Eve. If you would like to donate the bulletins for any Advent Sunday or Christmas Eve, the cost is \$10. Please make arrangements with Amy Novak.

CHRISTMAS FUND OFFERING

Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the United Church of Christ (UCC) accepts offerings to the Christmas Fund. This year's theme is "Grace upon Grace." The combined donations from across the denomination allow the UCC Pension Board to offer financial assistance to those active and retired clergy and lay employees of the UCC in need of help. The offering on December 24th helps the Pension Board to provide emergency grants, small annuities to those in need, and "thank you" gift checks to our lower-income retirees. To those who have helped shepherd the church, these Christmas Fund donations are a way to say "thank you" in a kind and generous way. Thank you for your generosity.

STUFF OUR STOCKINGS SOCK COLLECTION

New socks will be accepted throughout the month of December. Then, they will be donated in the cold of January to help the homeless in our area stay a bit warmer. It must be a horrible thing to live without shelter in the winter, but a warm, dry pair of socks makes it a bit more bearable. Thank you for your donations offered in the truest spirit of Christmas generosity to those most in need.

CHRISTMAS FLOWER COLLECTION

A traditional part of the Christmas celebration is the Christmas poinsettias. Their bright green and red colours are the basis of those being the Christmas colours. They brighten our church sanctuary and add more joy to our celebration. If you would like to have a poinsettia offered in memory or in honour of someone, please contact June Lampron at 247-5652 with the information, and send your donation to church or give it to Amy Novak on a Sunday. You may also fill out a flower form at the church on Sundays. The suggested offering per poinsettia is \$13.25. If paying by check, made payable to "Real Folks."

LUMINARIUM

This year's Luminarium schedule has take place on Saturday, December 23rd. It Concert from 4:30 – 5:30pm. Musical ensembles, our Chancel Choir, with a ukulele band. After the concert, handbells for yourself! At 6:00pm, Hall for music, a few words of Christmas evening closes with fireworks behind our night for the entire community. Please in this festive night together.



CHRISTMAS CHURCH CHOIR CD

The choir is releasing a CD for sale to support the church music program! Selections include our greatest hits: past Luminarium performances, virtual choir tracks, and lots of carols. CDs will be sold for \$15 each, or as a bundle of 5 for \$60. They make perfect Christmas gifts! They will be available for purchase at Sunday worship throughout the Advent season, at the Craft Fair on December 2nd, and at the Luminarium Concert in our Sanctuary. You can also coordinate a purchase with Anthony Tracia (781-738-6284) if needed. Thank you for supporting the efforts of our Music Committee so that we may continue to bring music of the highest quality to our church.



CHRISTMAS EVE

On December 24th, the church gives us the Christmas present of being able to worship twice! 🤗 Our Christmas Eve Service will begin at 7:30pm. Please accept this invitation to join us as we gather like the Bethlehem shepherds at Jesus' manger. In the darkness of one of the longest nights of the year, the light of Christmas breaks forth. Joyous music is raised like that of the angelic chorus that proclaimed Christ's birth. And we will come together as one to remind us that Jesus' humanity unites all people, pushing down the urge to stress our differences and instead raising-up the hope of peace on earth. Christmas is not really Christmas without the Christ Child.

ONLINE BIBLE STUDY GROUP

As mentioned above, Advent is a time of spiritual preparation. Along with worship, Bible reading and Bible study are ways to grow closer to Jesus. Our online Bible study group meets on alternate weeks for one hour. We are reading from the Gospel of John. Did you know that there are no Christmas stories in John's Gospel? It is even possible that John throws some cold water over them. Take a look at John 7:27 and then 7:42. If such things interest you, or raise questions, you may want to think about joining us. We would love to have you join us. Let's read, study and discuss the book that literally has changed the world. Send an email to randyc1897@gmail.com for the login.

NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE

The Annual Congregational Meeting will be held on January 21st. Our worship Service will be at the special time of 11:00am and the meeting will follow directly afterwards in person and via Zoom. In preparation for the Annual Meeting, the Nominations Committee will be asking people to serve the church on Boards and Committees. We are a thoroughly democratic church. This only works when the congregation's members invest themselves in the work of the church. You are needed.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Don't forget to check in at our website and FaceBook page. The links are directly below. They are updated several times each week and often share information from the larger church that we may not know of otherwise. Please like our pages and posts and share them as you choose.

GIFT CARDS

Big Y gift card sales are a continuing fundraiser of our congregation. Please contact Linda M. if you would like to purchase any. The church earns 5% on all sales. Thank you.

JOYFUL RINGERS BELL CHOIR



The Joyful Ringers rehearse on Sundays from 1 – 2:00pm. Anyone who is interested is welcome to become a part of the Bell Choir. Younger or older, church member or bell enthusiast, experienced or novice, we would love it if you would come forward and add the gift of more music to our sanctuary. If you may be interested, please reach out to Rev. Randy at randyc1897@gmail.com or Sue M., the Music Committee Chair.

Also, we do have a set of *chimes that the children may play at worship*. If your daughter or son may be interested in learning how to play the chimes, we would love to hear from you. It may even be fun for them.

CONTACT INFO: HATFIELD CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Website: www.hatfieldchurch.org Facebook: www.facebook.com/First-Congregational-Church-of-Hatfield-UCC

Pastor: Rev. Randy Calvo 413-824-1630 randyc1897@gmail.com

Music Minister: Anthony Tracia anthonytracia@gmail.com

Committee Chairpersons:

<i>Benevolence, Amy N.</i>	<i>Music Committee, Sue M.</i>
<i>Christian Education, Anita W.</i>	<i>Real Folks Society, Martha Z.</i>
<i>Church Moderator, Jonathan B.</i>	<i>Trustees, Ed M.</i>
<i>Deacons, Jeff F.</i>	





Saturday, December 23, 2023



JOIN US AT

Hatfield Luminarium

CHRISTMAS CONCERT

4:30-5:30PM

The First Congregational Church of Hatfield
at 41 Main Street

FEATURING:

The Chancel Choir
The Joyful Ringers Handbell Choir
Martha's Ukulele Group
Piano & Violin Duet
Organ Solo



NEW THIS YEAR!

Chime-In Time

The Handbell Choir welcomes children & families to join in for an interactive chime-ringing experience following the concert
5:30-6:00pm



Rain Date: Saturday, December 30

