

First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

December 3, 2025



PEACE IS MORE THAN THE ABSENCE OF CONFLICT

On Sunday, we will light the Candle of Peace on our Advent wreath. Our carols speak frequently of peace. *Silent Night* sings of Mary and her child sleeping “in heavenly peace.” In *Hark The Herald Angels Sing* we echo the angels song of “peace on earth and mercy mild.” In *O Little Town of Bethlehem* the morning stars are singing praises to “God the King and peace to us on earth.” But what is this “peace” of which we sing?

Nearly a generation ago there was a movie called *Miss Congeniality*, which I remember as a parody of beauty contests. At one point all the contestants file up to the microphone and respond to the question: “What’s the one thing in the world you hope for and want to work for?” Every contestant gives the same exact answer: World peace. The producers are suggesting that seeking world peace is the shallowest and most meaningless answer we can give to the question of what we most long for in our world.

There’s nothing wrong with that answer. We’d all agree that nothing is more needed in our world than peace. We should all be praying and working for the peaceful conclusion of wars in everywhere from Sudan to Ukraine, from the bitter polarization in our own country to Israel and Gaza.

But is this the only version of peace our seasonal carols are describing? It’s worth remembering that Jesus was born into a world where Rome’s imperial version of “pax romana” (The Peace of Rome) claimed to have established “peace on earth.” But Caesar Augustus’ “peace on earth” was the consequence of Rome invading weak political states, conquering them by military force, and then ruling with an iron fist while stealing their wealth and resources. This version of Roman peace silenced Jesus by putting him on a cross as someone who disturbed Rome’s imperial peace in Judah and Jerusalem.

One of my favorite quotes about Roman “peace on earth” is found in the Roman general Tacitus’ history of the Roman conquest of Britain named *Agricola*. Tacitus describes how Calgacus, the leader of the Caledonian army, inspires his army before a battle with the Romans. He tells them that they fight because Rome “makes a wasteland and calls it peace.”

Thomas Hardy survived the horrors of World War One and did not believe the outcome was a “war to end all wars” as his time’s political leaders promised. True peace did not emerge when the fighting stopped. So in 1924 Hardy wrote a satirical poem, lampooning the very idea of “peace on earth.”

Peace upon earth,” was said, we sing it
and pay a million priests to bring it.
After 2,000 years of mass
We’ve got as far as poison gas.

Surely the peace of which Jesus speaks and about which our carols sing is something more than the absence of active conflict, war, and violence in our world. The peace Jesus speaks of is the active presence of something positive, not the absence of something negative.

In the final chapters of John’s gospel, Jesus repeatedly speaks of peace. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (14:27). A little later he tells his disciples, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace.” The risen Christ repeatedly greets his followers with the words, “Peace be with you.” (20:19, 21, and 26) Peace is a baffling choice of words for Jesus to use as he moves toward his arrest, torture, and execution. They all shortly after Judas leaves to betray Jesus to Roman authorities and their Judean collaborators.

What is John trying to say when he clusters Jesus' invocation of peace in the context of his betrayal, arrest, torture, and execution? One of the most helpful explanations comes from Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian poet, novelist, and pastor who struggled with depression all his life and experienced the Great Depression, the rise of European fascism, the World War Two, and the Holocaust. In his *Longing for Home*, he writes

The peace that Jesus offers... has nothing to do with the things that are going on at the moment he offers it, which are for the most part tragic and terrible things. It is a profound and inward peace that sees with unflinching clarity the tragic and terrible things that are happening and yet ... is not shattered by them. . . . His peace comes not from the world but from something whole and holy because deep beneath all the broken and unholy things that are happening ... even as he speaks, Jesus sees what he calls the kingdom of God . . . the ultimate mystery of God's presence buried in [the world] like a treasure buried in a field. (pp. 110–111)

The peace promised by Jesus comes from God's loving presence with us no matter what tumult and chaos, tragedy or torment exists around us or within us. This peace arises from the confidence that whatever conflicts or struggles engulf our world or our lives, we know that even amid the wreckage of time, there is an unseen wisdom and power constantly at work struggling to bring good out of evil.

Peace is not an absence of conflict or negative energy. Peace is the positive, active presence of Christ who knows the depths of human suffering and the human savagery; and, in spite of everything, is always working to bring a peace that overcomes human barbarity and brokenness.

Blessings, Pastor Thomas

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

ADVENT STUDY "Minor Players in a Big Story"

Join Pastor Thomas for this year's Advent Study, "Minor Players in a Big Story." We'll be using familiar carols or hymns and scripture to look at some minor characters in the Christmas story: Elizabeth and Zechariah, the shepherds in the hills around Bethlehem, and King Herod.

December 7 – "Struck Speechless"

(Zechariah and Elizabeth)

Scripture – Luke 1:5-23, 57-80

hymn –

"Blessed Be The God of Israel"

December 14 – "Playing the

Victim Villain"

Scripture – Matthew 2:1-18

Carol – "Coventry Carol"

(Lullay, Lullah)

December 21 – "A Glimpse of Heaven"

Scripture – Luke 2:8-20

Carol – "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

Each session will begin shortly after Coffee Hour at 11:15 & conclude at 12:30 p.m.

Please sign up on the poster in fellowship hall so we have an idea of the size space we need for seating!

IT IS THE JOYFUL SEASON OF GIVING

We hope to make the holidays special for several families in need right here in East Longmeadow. When you are out shopping, please pick up a gift card, or 2, or 3. YOU decide... Walmart and Target offer the recipients a huge variety of options, but any gift card from a restaurant, the grocery store, the gas station, the pharmacy. YOU can decide! Please hang or just tuck your gift card(s) on the Giving Tree in the sanctuary in the red or green envelope we have provided. The staff at the East Longmeadow Council on Aging (The Senior Center) will then determine what and to whom the cards will be distributed to throughout the year. Your generosity will brighten the day, and perhaps lighten the load for others less fortunate and in need not just at Christmas time, but throughout the year.

We will need your gift cards on or before Sunday December 21. Thanks for always caring and sharing.

THANK YOU from your Mission and Outreach Committee

Your pledges and subsequent donations to our church allow us to continue to support necessary programs in our local area, as well as abroad.

Your dollars go well beyond funding our church operations (administration, utilities, services and upkeep). Because of your support, we, (in your name) are able to contribute to the East Longmeadow, Food Pantry and Fuel Fund, The Springfield Rescue Mission, the UCC and Church World Service. Your money also provides the meals we serve once each month at Loaves and Fishes, as well as the food we deliver each week to feed 5 families at Kensington School.

Our mission, our calling is to help our neighbors in need. Thank you for making it possible for us to do that. It is a privilege and a joy.

MUSICIAN'S MUSINGS 🎵

Advent Hymns, and what makes them different than Christmas Carols

The distinction lies in the purpose of hope and longing for the coming Messiah. They are often subdued and evocative of prophecy and redemption. You may notice some musical similarities between Advent and Lenten hymns, in that they are composed with a slower tempo, minor keys and more simplicity. But for Advent the text is that of patient expectation! During the next few weeks see (and hear) what you notice about Sunday morning music.

KEEPING CHILDREN WARM

What child doesn't lose a hat or a pair of mittens **at least once** during the cold winter? Please help us fill the basket in the breezeway with new or gently used hats, gloves, mittens and scarves for the children at Kensington School to keep them warm...because we care. Neighbors helping neighbors in need, it's what we do so well. Thank you so much!

PUB THEOLOGY

Due to last week's snow storm, Pub Theology has been rescheduled to Tuesday night, December 9!!

Meet in the back upper parking lot at 6 pm to depart and have dinner at a local restaurant. Open to suggestions and trying new places. Hope to see you there!



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