

Christmas Eve 2025
 The Rev. Mark Pendleton
 Christ Church Exeter

More Christmas Cowbell!

First of all, let me wish you all a joyous Christmas. After our Advent waiting, we hear from the prophet Isaiah how God works then and now: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined.”

It is the first for our still newish Director of Music Adam Peithmann. We know how much music contributes to the season.

New Englanders have a thing when it comes to weather. We all know it's true. We talk about it A LOT. Almost obsessively. It's probably due to the dramatic changes we all experience through the year. After all we live in a state that has recorded the highest wind speed ever recorded. A few years back I woke up to hear on the radio that atop Mt. Washington was the coldest place on earth that day. I went back to bed!

This unpredictability gave rise to the popular saying, attributed to Mark Twain: "If you don't like the weather in New England, just wait a few minutes.”

December 2025 so far has been unseasonably cool – the start of the month was the coldest in decades.

It is only natural for those of us living in a Northern climate that coldness, as well as the long dark nights, shape the feel of this season. It may even impact how we approach and experience of the message of Christmas.

This Fall we as a parish at Christ Church took the pulse of our people to ask them about their favorite church hymns and the songs that move their heart and feed their soul. It was part of our Chorus of Generosity focus. Music helps us celebrate, mourn, reflect, and feel the wonder and struggle of being alive. Music builds hope, culture, and community.

When it comes to Christmas, I often wonder if I am the only person whose favorite is not “Joy the World” or “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” but this carol from the 19th century: “In a Bleak Midwinter.” The words come from a poem by Christina Rossetti. She clearly imagined a very harsh wintery scene in ancient Bethlehem, but in truth, she was probably channeling the wet and frigid English countryside in December.

In the bleak midwinter
 frosty wind made moan,
 earth stood hard as iron,
 water like a stone:
 snow had fallen,
 snow on snow, snow on snow,
 in the bleak midwinter,
 long ago.

The carol had me at “bleak midwinter.” But at last verse, we are reminded of the eternal simplicity, humility and the poverty of the Nativity scene.

What can I give him,
 poor as I am?
 If I were a shepherd,
 I would bring a lamb,
 if I were a wise man
 I would do my part,
 yet what I can I give him,
 give my heart.

A seminary professor I knew years ago in New York City tells the following story about her church. There is a man in my neighborhood known by his first name to almost everyone. For as long as most people can remember, Emmet has lived on the streets. He remembers that his homelessness started when his mother died and his brother sold the apartment they were living in. He can't be sure of the year. With the first hint of cold weather, Emmet is at the door of the church almost every day and night.

By now, most folks about Emmett's life story, which he repeats without stopping without taking a breath after someone says hello. “I used to work at the Metropolitan Art Museum, and then I was bank teller until I couldn't work anymore. I had a girlfriend on Staten Island. And a brother-in-law in New Jersey.” The professor had heard the monologue many times.

When the church doors opened on Christmas Eve, Emmett stepped inside to worship with the others. One of the church leaders felt a tug and this one night let him sleep on a pew in the back of the church. When she went to turn out the lights, she heard him talk to himself – or so she thought. The same litany, his life story, his girlfriend on Staten Island, but this time, as if the record got unstuck, he said: “Thank you Jesus, for this warm house. It's so cold outside.” It was then and there that she felt that an angel had just made another visitation.

Even amidst the joy and peace that our Christmas celebrations can bring to us when we need it the most, it is also true that there the world can be cold. People can be cold. And that has probably always been the case. The long-awaited Messiah after all did not come into the world because everything was going well. There was a deep longing for something more.

In John's gospel we hear: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Christ came to reconcile the world with God. To narrow the distance and to fill that space in us that only God can fill. To save us from all that harms and distracts and distorts us from living the way we are intended to live and be – in God's image.

Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch clockmaker who hid Jews in her home during the Nazi occupation said it this way. “If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost.”

Yet when I consider the coldness of our world today -- the conflicts, the uncertainty and disillusionment, the hardship and the chronic loneliness that we hear about so often – what is clearly needed in the faith forecast is more warmth, more kindness, justice and compassion. And that is our work as we leave this night and return home.

How can each one of us make our churches, our communities, our nation warmer and safer places for all God’s people to live in dignity and be drawn into God’s holiness and promise.

There is a much-quoted line in an old Saturday Night Live Skit that has the actor Christopher Walken playing a fictional music producer. In this ridiculous parody, Walken interrupts the recording session of a hard rock band and demands, not louder electric guitars, base or bass or drums, but “More cowbell.” Walken has said in interviews that the skit has nearly ruined his life because everywhere he goes – restaurants, airport, walking down the street – random people shout “More cowbell” at him.

The skit from 25 years ago is among the most popular in the show’s history and gave us the popular catchphrase that made its way into the Cambridge Dictionary. It is defined as: “an extra quality that will make something or someone better, as in: It was a fairly average show - it needed more cowbell.

You may be thinking at this point: this homily may need more cowbell!

The way we care for God’s good creation and one another – to pierce the darkness, reshape our lives and transform the world – when I’m looking for direction I don’t first look to the Ten Commandments that some people of faith want to display in our classrooms, courthouses and on the public square. Mind you I have nothing against them. I just wonder if remembering and sharing Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount might be more urgent for this moment.

When Jesus said to the gathered crowd: (Matthew 5)

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.
 Blessed are the meek.
 Blessed are the merciful.
 Blessed are the pure in heart,
 Blessed are the peacemakers.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

Wherever you in your life in matters of faith, religion and meaning, I believe Christmas can be moment to return, reconnect, take stock and perhaps take another look. If the church’s dogma and doctrines seem tired and uninspired, and the church’s failures have led you or others to wander way, and if this all seems too ancient to be relevant today, then maybe, in silence, talk to God. Listen to God.

Yes, it is cold outside. May our hearts be warmed by the Good News that we share this holy night. Christ was born for us.