



# Happy New Year! Now we wait . . .

By **Pastor Elizabeth Clement**

Welcome to the new Christian calendar. As you probably know, Advent is the “season” that begins the liturgical calendar for the coming year and begins the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) Year B for people like us (and preachers like me) who use these as our worship and study guides to walk us through the Journey of Jesus.



**Pastor Liz Clement**

In RCL Year A, we spent a lot of time in the Gospel of Matthew — all those parables (!) are unique to that “telling” of the Jesus story. In Year B, we will often take our

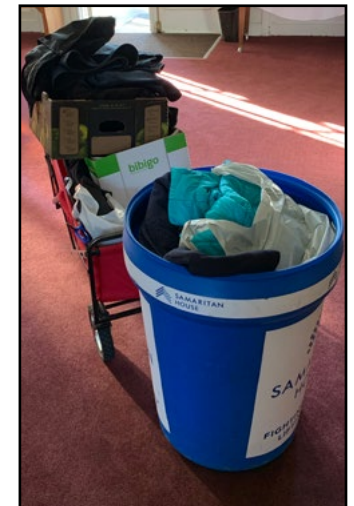
focus texts from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), and the Gospel of Mark. Mark’s gospel is the sparsest telling of the Jesus story and believed to be the first written down.

It is believed that each author — Mark, Matthew, Luke and John — wrote in each historical context for specific audiences. Which accounts for how very different each one is. (A “telling” is what I call these narratives because each shapes the story of Jesus’ birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection so uniquely; in much the way we shape our stories — MyStory, OurStory; we see different things, focus on different things, because different things have different significance for us and our StoryCatchers.)

Wonder Question No. 1: Why are there only two “birth narratives” while there are four gospels — why only two Christmas stories?



**CCB’ers come through with Family-to-Family jackets and cash**



**Jackets, jackets, jackets! Irene Hall unpacks the 32 brand-new jackets for children and seniors that members and friends of CCB donated as part of our annual Family-to-Family program with Samaritan House. Because of the pandemic, we couldn’t adopt the families and buy gifts for them as we usually do. So Samaritan House arranged a drive-through jacket program instead. CCB’ers also donated \$1,265 which translates into 50 \$25 Target gift cards which Samaritan House will distribute!**

## The Christian Year



See **HAPPY NEW YEAR**, Page 9

**A special gift from the choirs of CCB in this pandemic holiday season! Click [here](#) to listen to CCB’s first Christmas album!**

**We are an Open and Affirming Congregation valuing everyone’s race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, class, physical and mental abilities.**



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## Youth pageant reminds us to ‘Be Not Afraid’

By Danielle Chamberlin

As is our tradition, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, Dec. 20, our youth will tell the story of the first Christmas.

This year, we are planning an extra-special production recorded “virtually together” over Zoom. The youth are pulling out all the stops (and every Zoom trick we know) to make this story extra special, and they will be working every Saturday afternoon over Zoom through Advent to rehearse and record the production.

This format lets us extend our pageant beyond just the usual costumes, acting and singing to also include artwork and even animations from our talented youth.

This year’s theme will be “Be Not Afraid,” which has a particularly poignant meaning for us this year.

We are planning to rebroadcast the pageant at 5 p.m. Christmas Eve as our Children’s Service so pass the word to your neighbors and friends with young children to join us.



### Zoom Christmas Eve

One tradition that we have always cherished at CCB is hearing the Christmas story and singing Christmas Carols together during our Christmas Eve services.

This year, we can’t sing together in church so we’re planning our Christmas Eve service at 9 p.m. over Zoom so we can all gather together to sing.

To deal with Zoom-delayed audio, we’ll

ask different families to lead a carol while everyone else goes on mute and sings along at home.

We’d love to have volunteers to do readings and lead a carol or two. Let me know if you have suggestions or further ideas. Please sign up [here](#) or send an email to [office@ccbmont.org](mailto:office@ccbmont.org) with how you’d like to participate!

To go to the Congregational Church of Belmont website, click on [CCB](#).



## Our CCB music talent shines on — virtually

By Elizabeth Mye  
Music Director

We are very excited to present our newest virtual song, *Northern Lights* by Ola Gjeilo. This piece is beautiful and complex. With earnest perseverance, our mighty choir and musicians created something special.

*Northern Lights* will premier the first Sunday of Advent, Nov. 29! We hope you enjoy it.

## Coming soon... CCB's first Christmas album

Through the talents of Gary Brandenburg's recordings and Steve Chamberlin's technical wizardry, we are launching our first CCB Christmas Album!

The album includes select pieces of CCB music excellence over the years and is a gift to be cherished. The CCB Christmas Album can be accessed [here](#).

May the advent of Christmas be filled with CCB music!

# Creating a virtual choir takes patience, skill

By Steve Chamberlin

Covid-19 has temporarily halted in-person singing, but the CCB choir has remained busy as a virtual chorus.

With the help of Adobe Premiere editing software, we can assemble many individual video recordings into a single combined digital choir performance. The finished work will then be included in a future Sunday worship service.

Our third virtual choir production, *Northern Lights*, is coming Nov. 29. This piece will be the most challenging song we've yet attempted as a virtual choir.

The production process begins with the creation of audio guides for the soprano, alto, tenor and bass singers. First Jeffrey records the piano part, and then (Music Director) Elizabeth Mye makes two recordings of herself singing the soprano and alto parts while listening to Jeffrey's recording. For *Northern Lights*, Elizabeth also recorded tenor and bass guides on the piano, since those parts are below her vocal range. I then used Premiere to combine each of the SATB

audio recordings with the piano recording and merged the result with a video of the sheet music, turning page by page. The end result of this step is four separate sing-along vocal guides that members of the choir can use, one for each choir section. These vocal guides can be very labor intensive to create, considering the many recordings and editing steps required.

After the vocal guides are distributed to the choir, the choir members have a few weeks during which to learn and record their parts. Each recording must have one person's voice and nothing else. To avoid inadvertently including the vocal guide audio into their recordings, the choir members must listen to the vocal guide using headphones while they sing along. This explains why everyone you see in the finished videos looks like they're on a recording set.

When all the choir members have finished their individual videos, I collect them and import them into Adobe Premiere, where the major editing work begins. The first step is attempting to align a dozen or more

separate recordings on the timeline so that it sounds like everyone's synchronized. I can adjust the starting point of each person's recording in 1/30th of a second increments relative to the other recordings. If one voice is just a fraction of a second ahead or behind the others, it will sound disturbing and wrong.

This alignment process can be quite difficult because there's no single reference point that can be used reliably to synchronize one recording with another. The same singer may be slightly ahead or behind the beat at different times during the song, so attempts to synchronize on one particular word or note may just push other parts out of sync. I will often make tiny adjustments to the synchronization and then listen to the song again to evaluate whether the change sounds better or worse.

If it's not possible to synchronize all the recordings satisfactorily, it may be necessary to chop up some of them, and either remove a fraction of a second here and there, or add

**See VIRTUAL CHOIR, Page 5**

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## Virtual choir

### Continued from Page 4

a fraction of a second. Adding to the video will often create a noticeable video glitch, which must be resolved by repeating video frames from the section just before the part that was added.

The next step is to adjust the audio levels of each singer. Depending on their recording equipment and how close they sat to the microphone, each person's recording may be loud or soft. I begin by adjusting them all to a similar level. Then I adjust the balance between the soprano, alto, tenor and bass sections to bring them into balance. The choir typically has more soprano voices than altos, so each alto voice gets boosted slightly louder to help compensate.

Background noise is the enemy of good audio, so each recording must be carefully checked for sounds of footsteps, squeaking chairs, coughs, people in other rooms speaking, airplanes outside the window, and the like. For each such noise, I will normally reduce that recording's volume during the unwanted sound, or mute the recording entirely for a moment. But if the recording is of a soloist, or one of only two people singing a part, then it can't be muted without negatively impacting the song. In those cases, digital effects can sometimes be used to diminish the unwanted background noise.

Aside from removing strange noises, another major editing task is to fix "wrong singing." This includes mistakes like someone singing over a rest, holding a note for too long, starting to sing too early, singing the wrong note, or saying the wrong words. Such errors are common in a virtual choir environment because the singers can't hear one another during their performance. Wherever possible, these kinds of mistakes are masked or muted using the same methods as for background noises.

The final step of audio editing involves shaping the piece to help give it a more pleasing and interesting sound. Sometimes the tone of the piano recording doesn't quite match the tone of the voice recordings, due to differences in how they were recorded. Compared to the voice recordings, the piano may sound like it's at the bottom of a well or being heard through a wall, with reduced high frequencies and some noticeable reverb. Premiere's digital effects can adjust the

frequency equalization and add some mild reverb to the voices, creating a sound more like a theater than a closet. The song's audio level may also be subtly adjusted from one measure to the next, to help reinforce the piece's dynamics and ensure that loud parts are loud and quiet parts are quiet.

The whole audio-editing process involves lots of back and forth with Elizabeth, during which I'll send her draft recordings, and she'll send me feedback for further adjustments.

Once the audio portion is finished, it's time to begin working on the video. The original recordings from each choir member come in a variety of types: portrait orientation, landscape orientation, zoomed in, zoomed out, two people in one video, and so on.

The first step is to isolate part of each video that frames a similar-sized region around the person's head: roughly from their collar bone up to a few inches above their head, and a few inches to the side of either ear.

This framing and cropping process can be more difficult than it sounds because both the singers and the camera often move during the course of the recording. It's usually necessary to re-watch each singer's recording several times to verify that a particular cropping setup will be acceptable for the entire duration of the video. In the worst cases, it may be necessary to reframe a singer repeatedly during the course of the video, which effectively creates a virtual

moving camera to track their head.

The cropped videos are then scaled to make each one a similar size, and repositioned into different regions of the final video frame. The singers' videos are arranged into virtual sections, so each of the soprano, alto, tenor and bass singers will appear next to other faces singing their same part. If one of the choir members contributed an audio-only recording, then I will also insert a still photograph of that person into the final video, or just a box with their name. We don't want anyone to be left out.

This Brady Bunch view of singing heads may be used for the entire song, or it may be replaced in some parts with close-ups of individual singers. If close-ups are desired, they're added in a final step after the other video work is finished. A second copy of the featured singer's video recording is imported and aligned with the first, but no cropping or scaling is performed. The audio from the copy is separated from the video and deleted.

This copy is then trimmed so that it only includes a few moments during the featured section, rather than the whole song. Premiere's cross-fade effects are used to transition smoothly between the featured video and the full choir view.

Creating virtual choir performances in this way can be very time-consuming. The production of *Northern Lights* has been in progress for more than two months and has consumed more than 20 hours of editing time to date, with more work yet to do. We're continuing to look for time-saving methods.



Steve Chamberlin merges voices to create a virtual CCB choir.

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# Chocolate Fest lends helping hand to partners

By Micki Carter

The pandemic forced us to cancel Chocolate Fest this October, but it also provided us with an opportunity to show our Chocolate Fest partners — the local chocolatiers who offer their confections for sampling — some holiday love.

We launched the Boosting Our Chocolate Fest Partners program on Oct. 15, the very day we would have been welcoming our chocolate-loving guests to the 38th edition of Chocolate Fest.

Instead of greeting them in person, we invited them to buy their holiday chocolate from one of our Chocolate Fest partners and give them a much-needed “boost” in sales, we hoped, that would keep them alive and well through this difficult year.

And, we admit, it was also an opportunity to keep Chocolate Fest alive for our dedicated chocolate-loving friends and family.

The program ended the day before Thanksgiving although we will continue to handle pick-ups of those orders at the church through Dec. 4.

We don't have final results yet, but preliminary numbers are impressive. We received 102 orders that totalled more than \$8,000 in sales for the eight partners, an average of more than \$1,000 in sales for each one.

And because the partners have agreed to return the usual Chocolate Fest boutique percentage to the church, we expect to have raised a little more than \$1,500 to be divided up according to CCB's all-church fundraiser policy.

Perhaps more important than the numbers is the good will for Chocolate Fest that the program engendered. Several of the eight partners (Brehmer's Candy, Preston's Candies, 3D Candy, Charlotte's Truffles, CocoTutti, Jade Chocolates, NeoCocoa and the Chocolate Exchange) have expressed how pleased they have been with the success of the program.

Those who ordered chocolate through the program had a chance to leave a comment. Here are some of them:

“So glad y'all are doing this to support our local artisans!”

“Can't wait until next year! We've been attending for years.”



**Cindy Brehmer of Brehmer's Candies carries orders into the church.**

“Please add me to the mailing list for the Chocolate Fest!”

“Thank you for organizing the Chocolate Fest in the midst of a global pandemic! We all need a little bit more chocolate in our lives.”

You can still order online directly from these partners. Go to [ChocolateFestofBelmont.org](http://ChocolateFestofBelmont.org) and click on their logos. They are links to their ordering websites.

Special thanks to Lea Mavroudis for her enormous support and to Christy Brewer, Maura Whitmore and Linda Howard for lending a hand. And thanks too to the Board of Christian Ed for letting us use the Sunday School room for chocolate storage.

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# Youth hear CCB veteran's first-hand account

By Linda Howard

On the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month in 1918, the Armistice was signed signifying a ceasefire of World War I.

This was the opening statement as the youth group of CCB met on Zoom Nov. 7. The theme of the meeting was Veterans Day and its history. Those in attendance experienced the special gift of hearing a first-person account of one veteran's service during World War II.

In October 1942, at the age of 21, Bob Donovan, a member of our church, began his tour of duty which lasted 36 months in the South Pacific. He traveled to Hawaii, Australia, Dutch New Guinea and the Philippine islands of Leyte and Mindanao.

The teens and adults alike on the Zoom meeting were held in rapt attention as he told stories of history in the making. If you would like to hear his talk, click [here](#).

In addition to Bob's account of his service to our country, we also heard brief written statements read aloud from two other veterans in our church: Bob Shouse and Mike Venturino.

Bob Shouse served in the Air Force during the Korean War. His squadron consisted of 15 B-47 bombers. The basic mission of his squadron "was to maintain the aircraft and be ready to meet any national emergency."

Mike Venturino served in the Air Force during the Vietnam War flying C-141s in and out of Southeast Asia.



**Magazines are being collected for the Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service in January. You are invited to leave your magazines (with your address label removed) in the plastic bin on the front porch of the church. The Peninsula Multifaith Coalition will deliver them to nursing homes.**

Each participant in the Zoom meeting was provided stationery, envelopes and stickers. They were given the opportunity to write veterans letters of gratitude for their service. Several teens took up this offer and wrote to family members and friends who are veterans.

After Bob Donovan's talk, the second half of the meeting involved something delicious. Recognizing another November tradition, we made pumpkin pies. There was a cheerful camaraderie as we chatted and assembled the ingredients. Most fol-

lowed the traditional recipe on the back of the can of pumpkin filling, but some added fresh ginger or special spices to make a Chai Pumpkin Pie. One of those pies went to Bob and Ella Mae.

All the youth of our church, teens and younger, will have the opportunity to share more good times together during upcoming Saturday Zoom meetings as rehearsals get under way for the annual Christmas pageant. The pageant is open to all "children" up to the age of 105.

I think that covers everyone.

## MLK JR MULTIFAITH DAY OF SERVICE

### REIMAGINED



### Monday, January 18, 2021

Due to COVID-19, this year's Day of Service is being thoughtfully reimagined to be meaningful for all.

We will start with an online welcome presentation at 8:30 am, including speakers talking about the importance of celebrating Dr. King in 2021. Most projects are family-friendly and will end around 12:00 pm.

Projects are being developed that participants can prepare at home, in addition to projects that can be safely done in person.

**Registration opens in early December**

#### Participating Faith Houses

- Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Silicon Valley • Baha'i Faith of the Mid-Peninsula • Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints • Congregation Beth Jacob • Congregational Church of Belmont • Congregational Church of San Mateo • Episcopal Church of St. Matthew • Episcopal Church of the Epiphany • First Presbyterian Church of Burlingame • Holy Trinity Lutheran Church of San Carlos • Island United Church of Foster City • Jewish Community Relations Council • Pacifica Institute • Peninsula Sinai Congregation • Peninsula Temple Beth El • Peninsula Temple Shalom • St. Andrew's Lutheran Church

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# Pledges promise faith in the future of CCB

By Mike Venturino

Faith in our future? A look at CCB's pledging for 2021 tells me that there must be a lot of it. As of Nov. 24, the church has received 12 pledges totaling \$41,270. What a great start!

To all of you who have expressed your faith in our Covid and post-Covid future in this way: Thank You!

I bring this news by virtue of my position as Financial Secretary – acting. Note the term “acting.” I will continue to be CCB's treasurer, but doing that and continuing the Financial Secretary job is becoming too much.

What does the Financial Secretary do? Per the bylaws:

“The Financial Secretary shall be elected from the lay membership of the church for a term of two years. The Financial Secretary shall receive the pledge cards from the Stewardship Committee; shall issue offering envelopes and set up an account for each pledge in a manner as directed by the Board of Trustees; shall receive a weekly written accounting from the Board of Trustees' qualified counters of pledges and offerings

whose donors can be identified; and shall record all such moneys and issue quarterly statements to all persons pledging and annual statements to all other identifiable donors. All records of the Financial Secretary are to remain confidential.”

Basically, the Financial Secretary keeps track of individual donations to the church, and tracks how pledges are being fulfilled. The income information is then sent to our bookkeeper without identifying the sources so that it can be booked.

Let me list the perks of the Financial Secretary position:

- 1) There are NO MEETINGS to attend.
- 2) We have streamlined the workflow. The job should take about half an hour weekly. If you need to miss a week, the information is all captured for when you can get to it or someone can back you up. It can be worked out with the bookkeeper.
- 3) The traditional pledge and donation record forms are all Excel spreadsheets; no paper records to maintain and the spreadsheets do the math(!).
- 4) There is help available.
- 5) The gratitude of the treasurer and

Board of Trustees, not to mention the entire congregation.

6) Oh, and did I mention that there are NO MEETINGS to attend?

Drawbacks: Can't think of any.

If serving the church this way seems like a fit, let me know. I'll be happy to help you get started and give you any help needed.

## PPP – an update

We will be applying for forgiveness of most of our CARES Act (Payroll Protection Program) loan about the middle of December.

The church's bank, Bank of America, will begin processing the applications at that time. We will apply to have about 90 percent of our loan forgiven.

The rest we can either simply pay back or keep on a promissory note at one percent interest to be paid off over two years.

The Trustees will decide which seems to work best for us. The bookkeeper and treasurer have assembled all the needed documentation to have the application approved.

# Order poinsettias to decorate for Christmas!



In the spirit of keeping our traditions alive, and decorating our church for Christmas, we will be donating poinsettia plants just like all the other years! Please donate \$20 per plant [here](#) (and put “poinsettia” in the Comments box) or in our Sunday offering. Tell us whom the flowers are honoring, loved ones passed or present. In this difficult Covid year, it's not hard to remember our blessings and the cherished folks who have made our lives on earth worth living. Office Administrator Lea Mavroudis will make a list of the honorees for the bulletin; Maura Whitmore will buy the plants; and our church will look as beautiful as it always has in this difficult but lovely holiday season.

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## December liturgy

<b>First Sunday of Advent</b> November 29, 2020 <i>ART -- PRAYER</i>	Isaiah 64:1-9	Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19	1 Corinthians 1:3-9	Mark 13:24-37
<b>Second Sunday of Advent</b> December 6, 2020 <i>ART -- PRAYER</i>	Isaiah 40:1-11	Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13	2 Peter 3:8-15a	Mark 1:1-8
<b>Third Sunday of Advent</b> December 13, 2020 <i>ART -- PRAYER</i>	Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11	Psalm 126 <i>or</i> <i>Luke 1:46b-55</i>	1 Thessalonians 5:16-24	John 1:6-8, 19-28
<b>Fourth Sunday of Advent</b> December 20, 2020 <i>ART -- PRAYER</i>	2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16	Luke 1:46b-55 <i>or</i> <i>Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26</i>	Romans 16:25-27	Luke 1:26-38
<b>Nativity of the Lord - Proper I</b> December 24 & 25, 2019 <i>Christmas Eve, Morn, or Mid-Day</i> <i>ART -- PRAYER</i>	Isaiah 9:2-7	Psalm 96	Titus 2:11-14	Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)
<b>Nativity of the Lord - Proper II</b> December 24 & 25, 2019 <i>Christmas Eve, Morn, or Mid-Day</i> <i>ART -- PRAYER</i>	Isaiah 62:6-12	Psalm 97	Titus 3:4-7	Luke 2:(1-7), 8-20
<b>Nativity of the Lord - Proper III</b> December 24 & 25, 2019 <i>Christmas Eve, Morn, or Mid-Day</i> <i>ART -- PRAYER</i>	Isaiah 52:7-10	Psalm 98	Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12)	John 1:1-14
<b>First Sunday after Christmas Day</b> December 29, 2019 <i>ART -- PRAYER</i>	Isaiah 63:7-9	Psalm 148	Hebrews 2:10-18	Matthew 2:13-23

## January Messenger deadline will be Monday, Dec. 28.

### Happy New Year

#### Continued from Page One

Back to the new year and waiting. . . . Maybe it's just me but I find that the four weeks of Advent are among the most difficult to observe, even more difficult than the six weeks of Lent. Why?

Because we are already waiting with great anticipation for Christmas, which began to show up in every retail and public space in the world along about Labor Day. The whole world is driving, pushing, pumping up the remaining days to Christmas into our heads (27 days, 11 hours, 32 minutes, as I write on Black Friday), fueling anxiety, anticipation and the need for preparation in us.

Our story — the church's story of a promised redeemer that shows up as baby

(he can't even vote; I hope he came in time to be counted in the census, at least), born among farm animals to an oddly blended family in — where is Bethlehem, anyway? It's not even a story; it's a mashup of stories from a galaxy far, far away. That's what we have to offer.

And yet, right now, in pandemic-tide, we will do well to look for the hope of all nations in the most unlikely places. We must have learned that much in 2020. And in this congregation's season of transition and future-gazing, we are organized to look outside the box (or manger?).

Hmm. The season of Advent may have more promise than I thought.

In our worship on this season of Advent, we traditionally light the candles on the

Advent wreath, one each Sunday, following these themes: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. Some of us will have (and, perhaps, make) an Advent wreath at home, and join Christians across the globe in preparation and anticipation...of hope, peace, joy and love. (Find readings for Advent at this [link](#))

Wonder Question No. 2: I wonder what unexpected place the Babe — the hope, the peace, the joy and love that is promised — will turn up this year? How can we make them show up?

We will be looking. And preparing. And waiting.

Wishing you all the blessings of this Advent season, and grace upon grace.

**Pastor Liz**

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