

Bethel Focus

Bethel Presbyterian Church, Organized 1764

In The Bleak Midwinter

THE EDITOR OF SCRIBNER'S MONTHLY needed a Christmas poem to fill out his December 1872 issue. He cast about for various authors to write something, but they all turned him down. Finally, he decided to solicit a poem from one of the most famous English poets of the period: Christina Rossetti.

Rossetti had come to fame 10 years before with her collection *Goblin Market and Other Poems* By 1872, she was diagnosed with Graves' disease and experienced significant pain. However, that did not stop her from writing poetry. And so, in response to the request from Scribner's, she sent a poem that started:

**In the bleak mid-winter,
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.**

Strictly speaking, December isn't a very snowy month in Bethlehem. December weather there is generally the same as central Mississippi: average highs in the low 60s, average lows in the low 40s.

While one can get a frost or even an occasional flurry — because Bethlehem sits at an elevation of 2,500 feet — one is unlikely to experience Rossetti's "bleak midwinter."



And yet, spiritually speaking, Bethlehem was experiencing a "bleak midwinter" 2,000 years ago. There had been silence for over 400 years. Indeed, the words of Amos had come true: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land —not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11). Not only this, the people still felt like they were in exile; even though they had come back to the Promised Land, they were dominated by foreign powers — Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece and now Rome. They were still looking for the promised Davidic King who would rule forever. And so, there was a sense of bleakness like the dreariness of winter as God's people wondered: Would He remember His promises? Would He deliver His people? Did He

care? God's people 2,000 years ago weren't alone in asking these questions. We wonder these same things; even as we are surrounded by Christmas cheer and promise, we see a landscape that looks bleak, frosty, cold and hard. We wonder if there would be any deliverance in the dead of our winter — will it be always winter and never Christmas? Will God deliver us? Does he care? That's where Christmas stories like Ruth help us, because while it was not the bleak midwinter physically in this story, it surely was both spiritually and emotionally. As we pay attention to Ruth's story, we see the patterns of God's grace that will lead us back to Bethlehem at Christmas and on to Calvary on Good Friday, that give us hope and joy in our challenging present, that point us for-

December 2014

Sermon Schedule

- 12/7 "The Danger of Not Forgiving" Mt. 18:21-35
- 12/14 "A Profound Announcement" Is. 9:1-7
- 12/21 "A Powerful Proclamation" Luke 2:8-21
- 12/28 Mr. Will Milks

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ward to God's final deliverance at the end of the age. THE BLEAKNESS OF EXILE After all, the opening chapter of Ruth and Naomi's story signals how bleak and hopeless their situation was. From the opening verse, we get a sense of difficulty. The difficulty was the result of inconsistent spiritual leadership from the judges who ruled Israel. Their spiritual failure brought divine judgment in the form of famine — God was using these difficult days, these bleak

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days, to turn his people’s hearts back to himself (Ruth 1:1; Deuteronomy 28). The difficulty that Israel experienced generally was mirrored in Elimelech’s family particularly. Their departure from the Promised Land into the land of exile was a signal of their spiritual condition — like the rest of the country, they were doing what was right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25). And so, we aren’t surprised when their departure from God’s land brings about death (Ruth 1:3-5), as Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion all die in rapid succession, leaving no heirs and no support for their wives. All of this is tragic — Elimelech’s wife, Naomi, is exiled from Israel in a foreign

land, but she is alone. Her aloneness is not a problem merely from an emotional standpoint, but also from an economic one. Without husband or sons or grandsons, she faced destitution. Without her husband, sons or heirs, widows like Naomi were vulnerable economically, open to abuse or neglect without the provision and protection of a husband or son in a male-dominated society. As Naomi looked at her future, it was no wonder that she felt broken, bitter, bleak — it was like she was in the “very dead of winter.” Is there any hope in the midst of all this hopelessness?
THE BLESSEDNESS OF RETURN
 The Bible tells us that hope returns when

we return to the Lord. That’s exactly what Naomi experienced when she decided to return to Bethlehem from Moab. But why did she decide to return home to Bethlehem? “She heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food” (1:6). God had taken the initiative; He was drawing His people back to himself; He was on the move. The sign that this was the case was that there was food again. Could it be that the bleak midwinter was passing? Could it be that Christmas could be around the corner — the time of the Lord’s deliverance, the time when the Redeemer comes? Hope returns when we recognize that the Lord’s turn toward us is motivated by His



Session Minutes

The Session and Diaconate of Bethel Presbyterian Church met jointly on Sunday, November 9, 2014 at 2:00 PM in the Conference Room of the Family Life Center with Moderator, Rev. John Gess, for the regular scheduled joint quarterly meeting. The meeting was called to order and opened with reading of the Scriptures from Psalm 100 and prayer by the Moderator.

A quorum was present. Elders present: J. Brent Clinton, Christopher L. Wallace, Robert N. Boyd, Frank C. Falls, Robert C. Love, Jr., Steven H. Linder, D. Ross Love, W. Hampton Stowe, III, James G. Long, Timothy G. Marsh, and Robert B. Meek, Jr. Also present were Diaconate Chairman, Steve Britt, and Deacons Calvin Reese, Larry Falls, and Ruben Trevino.

A motion was M/S/A to approve the minutes of the October 5, 2014, October 15, 2014, October 19, 2014, and October 26, 2014 Session meetings, and the October 19, 2014 and November 2, 2014 Congregational meet-

ings as written and mailed to each Session member.

Steve Britt, Chairman of the Diaconate, gave the Deacons report and reviewed the minutes of the October 7, 2014 Deacons meeting, copies of which are appended to these minutes. A motion was M/S/A to approve the Deacons report, Deacons minutes, including changes to the previously approved 2015 Budget bringing the revised total to \$556,864.56, financial report and actions taken.

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A motion was made, seconded and approve to approve the following revision to WIC Officers/Chairpersons for 2015: Circle # 1 – Kay Jackson, Circle # 2 – Marianne Falls, Circle # 3 – Nicole Milks, Colleen Riddle Circle – Kathy Compton, President Elect – Meredith Clinton, MNA Co-chair – Holly Marsh, Christian Education Co-chair – Deb Thiessen.

A motion was M/S/A to adjourn. The meeting was closed with prayer by James Long.

Robert C. Love, Jr.
Clerk of Session

In The Bleak Midwinter, continued

love. It is hinted at in Ruth 1 — it comes more clearly as the book unfolds. Here, the Lord's steadfast love is modeled in the steadfast love and loyalty demonstrated by Ruth as Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to return home, find new husbands and serve their Moabite gods. And she gives them a blessing: "May the Lord deal kindly with you (may the Lord show you *hesed*, covenant love, covenant loyalty) as you have dealt with the dead and with me" (1:8). In the end, Orpah returns to Moab, but Ruth remains. She "clung to Naomi" (1:14), a word that echoes back to Genesis 2:24. Ruth cleaved to Naomi in covenant love because Ruth had come to know God's covenant love for her (1:16-17). God's covenant love is expressed in promises — when Ruth says, "Your people shall be my people, and

your God my God," she was reiterating God's own covenant promise to His people: "You shall be my people and I shall be your God." And so, God's love, His covenant loyalty, expressed through Ruth's own covenant loyalty, was at the heart of His turn toward His people and toward Naomi. That's what turned Naomi's heart toward home and hope. The only place of hope for any of us is that the God of steadfast love has visited His people. And not just in Bethlehem in Ruth's time: over a thousand years later, Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, would sing, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68-69). The Lord has visited His people and raised up a horn of

salvation — His name is Jesus. And He was born in Ruth and Naomi's town, in Boaz's town, in David's town, as the true redeemer of God's people. Will you end your exile and return to Him? Will you say with Christina Rossetti at the end of her poem:

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 can I give him? Give him my heart.

Dr. Lucas is associate professor of church history at RTS-Jackson and senior minister at First Presbyterian Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

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Prayer Requests:

Pastor John Gess and Interns Will Milks and Jonathan Goundry as they preach and minister to the Bethel congregation, and for their families.

The Ashbaugh family, and the ministry of RUF at Winthrop.

The Lees as they seek to implement the Member Care Ministry for MTW Latin America, that the Lord will enable them to minister to the MTW missionaries of Latin America with compassion and humility; for the health of their daughter and granddaughter Amber & Tegan, who were in a severe car accident but received no major injuries. Pray for their upcoming travel.

Please pray for the Pulpit Committee and all facets of the search for Bethel's next pastor. Please pray that God would be glorified in the process

and for His provision for the church.

Session and Diaconate members, WIC officers, Sunday School teachers, Bible Study leaders, Youth leaders/teachers, giving thanks for their faithfulness and willingness to serve.

Missionaries throughout the world, as well as local ministries such as Habitat for Humanity, God's Kitchen, Clover Area Assistance Center and Biblical Studies Released Time. Please pray fervently for the work in Northern Mexico.


Pray for our nation, particularly the upcoming mid-term elections.

Pray for people who are afflicted by the Ebola outbreak, and for aid workers. Pray for effective treatment, containment and eradication of this terrible virus.

Our college students, and expectant mothers and their unborn babies within the church family.

Our soldiers serving in Afghanistan, Europe & Iraq: John Rice (grandson of Joe & Phyllis Wysor) recovering from injuries from a roadside bomb explosion, Greg Sandifer, and Ted Trevino.

Charlotte Barnett, Monnie Blackman (C. Robinson's sister, lupus), Loma Burton, Abe Craddock (friend of J. LeMoyne, emphysema), Bob Currence, Zeke Dunbar (3 year old suffering from cancer, friend of M. Falls), Susan Heffner (cancer), Bob Kenley, Herb LeMoyne (J. LeMoyne's brother, Parkinson's disease), Rick Lindsay (Pastor of Scherer Memorial PCA, cancer), Harold McCarter, Jesse Patino (B. Love's brother-in-law, lymphoma), Jim Pittman (V. Linder's brother, prostate cancer, has spread to his spine), Sally Sturgis (T. Bowman's niece, melanoma), Bobby Wallace (effective cancer treatments), Clay West. Pray for our church and the Pastoral Search Committee.



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In The Bleak Midwinter, continued

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salvation — His name is Jesus. And He was born in Ruth and Naomi's town, in Boaz's town, in David's town, as the true redeemer of God's people. Will you end your exile and return to Him? Will you say with Christina Rossetti at the end of her poem:

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 can I give him? Give him my heart.

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Pastor John Gess and Interns Will Milks and Jonathan Goundry as they preach and minister to the Bethel congregation, and for their families.

The Ashbaugh family, and the ministry of RUF at Winthrop.

The Lees as they seek to implement the Member Care Ministry for MTW Latin America, that the Lord will enable them to minister to the MTW missionaries of Latin America with compassion and humility; for the health of their daughter and granddaughter Amber & Tegan, who were in a severe car accident but received no major injuries. Pray for their upcoming travel.

Please pray for the Pulpit Committee and all facets of the search for Bethel's next pastor. Please pray that God would be glorified in the process

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Pray for our nation, particularly the upcoming mid-term elections.

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Our college students, and expectant mothers and their unborn babies within the church family.

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THE EDITOR OF SCRIBNER'S MONTHLY needed a Christmas poem to fill out his December 1872 issue. He cast about for various authors to write something, but they all turned him down. Finally, he decided to solicit a poem from one of the most famous English poets of the period: Christina Rossetti.

Rossetti had come to fame 10 years before with her collection *Goblin Market and Other Poems* By 1872, she was diagnosed with Graves' disease and experienced significant pain. However, that did not stop her from writing poetry. And so, in response to the request from Scribner's, she sent a poem that started:

**In the bleak mid-winter,
frosty wind made moan
Earth stood hard as iron,
water like a stone
Snow had fallen, snow on
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In the bleak midwinter, long
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Strictly speaking, December isn't a very snowy month in Bethlehem. December weather there is generally the same as central Mississippi: average highs in the low 60s, average lows in the low 40s.

While one can get a frost or even an occasional flurry — because Bethlehem sits at an elevation of 2,500 feet — one is unlikely to experience Rossetti's "bleak midwinter."



And yet, spiritually speaking, Bethlehem was experiencing a "bleak midwinter" 2,000 years ago. There had been silence for over 400 years. Indeed, the words of Amos had come true: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land —not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11). Not only this, the people still felt like they were in exile; even though they had come back to the Promised Land, they were dominated by foreign powers — Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece and now Rome. They were still looking for the promised Davidic King who would rule forever. And so, there was a sense of bleakness like the dreariness of winter as God's people wondered: Would He remember His promises? Would He deliver His people? Did He

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Robert C. Love, Jr.
Clerk of Session

In The Bleak Midwinter, continued

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salvation — His name is Jesus. And He was born in Ruth and Naomi's town, in Boaz's town, in David's town, as the true redeemer of God's people. Will you end your exile and return to Him? Will you say with Christina Rossetti at the end of her poem:

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 can I give him? Give him my heart.

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Organized 1764

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Pastor John Gess and Interns Will Milks and Jonathan Goundry as they preach and minister to the Bethel congregation, and for their families.

The Ashbaugh family, and the ministry of RUF at Winthrop.

The Lees as they seek to implement the Member Care Ministry for MTW Latin America, that the Lord will enable them to minister to the MTW missionaries of Latin America with compassion and humility; for the health of their daughter and granddaughter Amber & Tegan, who were in a severe car accident but received no major injuries. Pray for their upcoming travel.

Please pray for the Pulpit Committee and all facets of the search for Bethel's next pastor. Please pray that God would be glorified in the process

and for His provision for the church.

Session and Diaconate members, WIC officers, Sunday School teachers, Bible Study leaders, Youth leaders/teachers, giving thanks for their faithfulness and willingness to serve.

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Pray for our nation, particularly the upcoming mid-term elections.

Pray for people who are afflicted by the Ebola outbreak, and for aid workers. Pray for effective treatment, containment and eradication of this terrible virus.

Our college students, and expectant mothers and their unborn babies within the church family.

Our soldiers serving in Afghanistan, Europe & Iraq: John Rice (grandson of Joe & Phyllis Wysor) recovering from injuries from a roadside bomb explosion, Greg Sandifer, and Ted Trevino.

Charlotte Barnett, Monnie Blackman (C. Robinson's sister, lupus), Loma Burton, Abe Craddock (friend of J. LeMoyne, emphysema), Bob Currence, Zeke Dunbar (3 year old suffering from cancer, friend of M. Falls), Susan Heffner (cancer), Bob Kenley, Herb LeMoyne (J. LeMoyne's brother, Parkinson's disease), Rick Lindsay (Pastor of Scherer Memorial PCA, cancer), Harold McCarter, Jesse Patino (B. Love's brother-in-law, lymphoma), Jim Pittman (V. Linder's brother, prostate cancer, has spread to his spine), Sally Sturgis (T. Bowman's niece, melanoma), Bobby Wallace (effective cancer treatments), Clay West. Pray for our church and the Pastoral Search Committee.



Bethel Focus

Bethel Presbyterian Church, Organized 1764

In The Bleak Midwinter

THE EDITOR OF SCRIBNER'S MONTHLY needed a Christmas poem to fill out his December 1872 issue. He cast about for various authors to write something, but they all turned him down. Finally, he decided to solicit a poem from one of the most famous English poets of the period: Christina Rossetti.

Rossetti had come to fame 10 years before with her collection *Goblin Market and Other Poems* By 1872, she was diagnosed with Graves' disease and experienced significant pain. However, that did not stop her from writing poetry. And so, in response to the request from Scribner's, she sent a poem that started:

**In the bleak mid-winter,
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.**

Strictly speaking, December isn't a very snowy month in Bethlehem. December weather there is generally the same as central Mississippi: average highs in the low 60s, average lows in the low 40s.

While one can get a frost or even an occasional flurry — because Bethlehem sits at an elevation of 2,500 feet — one is unlikely to experience Rossetti's "bleak midwinter."



And yet, spiritually speaking, Bethlehem was experiencing a "bleak midwinter" 2,000 years ago. There had been silence for over 400 years. Indeed, the words of Amos had come true: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land —not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11). Not only this, the people still felt like they were in exile; even though they had come back to the Promised Land, they were dominated by foreign powers — Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece and now Rome. They were still looking for the promised Davidic King who would rule forever. And so, there was a sense of bleakness like the dreariness of winter as God's people wondered: Would He remember His promises? Would He deliver His people? Did He

care? God's people 2,000 years ago weren't alone in asking these questions. We wonder these same things; even as we are surrounded by Christmas cheer and promise, we see a landscape that looks bleak, frosty, cold and hard. We wonder if there would be any deliverance in the dead of our winter — will it be always winter and never Christmas? Will God deliver us? Does he care? That's where Christmas stories like Ruth help us, because while it was not the bleak midwinter physically in this story, it surely was both spiritually and emotionally. As we pay attention to Ruth's story, we see the patterns of God's grace that will lead us back to Bethlehem at Christmas and on to Calvary on Good Friday, that give us hope and joy in our challenging present, that point us for-

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land, but she is alone. Her aloneness is not a problem merely from an emotional standpoint, but also from an economic one. Without husband or sons or grandsons, she faced destitution. Without her husband, sons or heirs, widows like Naomi were vulnerable economically, open to abuse or neglect without the provision and protection of a husband or son in a male-dominated society. As Naomi looked at her future, it was no wonder that she felt broken, bitter, bleak — it was like she was in the “very dead of winter.” Is there any hope in the midst of all this hopelessness?
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salvation — His name is Jesus. And He was born in Ruth and Naomi's town, in Boaz's town, in David's town, as the true redeemer of God's people. Will you end your exile and return to Him? Will you say with Christina Rossetti at the end of her poem:

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 can I give him? Give him my heart.

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Bethel Focus

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In The Bleak Midwinter

THE EDITOR OF SCRIBNER'S MONTHLY needed a Christmas poem to fill out his December 1872 issue. He cast about for various authors to write something, but they all turned him down. Finally, he decided to solicit a poem from one of the most famous English poets of the period: Christina Rossetti.

Rossetti had come to fame 10 years before with her collection *Goblin Market and Other Poems* By 1872, she was diagnosed with Graves' disease and experienced significant pain. However, that did not stop her from writing poetry. And so, in response to the request from Scribner's, she sent a poem that started:

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Strictly speaking, December isn't a very snowy month in Bethlehem. December weather there is generally the same as central Mississippi: average highs in the low 60s, average lows in the low 40s.

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And yet, spiritually speaking, Bethlehem was experiencing a "bleak midwinter" 2,000 years ago. There had been silence for over 400 years. Indeed, the words of Amos had come true: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land —not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11). Not only this, the people still felt like they were in exile; even though they had come back to the Promised Land, they were dominated by foreign powers — Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece and now Rome. They were still looking for the promised Davidic King who would rule forever. And so, there was a sense of bleakness like the dreariness of winter as God's people wondered: Would He remember His promises? Would He deliver His people? Did He

care? God's people 2,000 years ago weren't alone in asking these questions. We wonder these same things; even as we are surrounded by Christmas cheer and promise, we see a landscape that looks bleak, frosty, cold and hard. We wonder if there would be any deliverance in the dead of our winter — will it be always winter and never Christmas? Will God deliver us? Does he care? That's where Christmas stories like Ruth help us, because while it was not the bleak midwinter physically in this story, it surely was both spiritually and emotionally. As we pay attention to Ruth's story, we see the patterns of God's grace that will lead us back to Bethlehem at Christmas and on to Calvary on Good Friday, that give us hope and joy in our challenging present, that point us for-

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land, but she is alone. Her aloneness is not a problem merely from an emotional standpoint, but also from an economic one. Without husband or sons or grandsons, she faced destitution. Without her husband, sons or heirs, widows like Naomi were vulnerable economically, open to abuse or neglect without the provision and protection of a husband or son in a male-dominated society. As Naomi looked at her future, it was no wonder that she felt broken, bitter, bleak — it was like she was in the “very dead of winter.” Is there any hope in the midst of all this hopelessness?
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Session Minutes

The Session and Diaconate of Bethel Presbyterian Church met jointly on Sunday, November 9, 2014 at 2:00 PM in the Conference Room of the Family Life Center with Moderator, Rev. John Gess, for the regular scheduled joint quarterly meeting. The meeting was called to order and opened with reading of the Scriptures from Psalm 100 and prayer by the Moderator.

A quorum was present. Elders present: J. Brent Clinton, Christopher L. Wallace, Robert N. Boyd, Frank C. Falls, Robert C. Love, Jr., Steven H. Linder, D. Ross Love, W. Hampton Stowe, III, James G. Long, Timothy G. Marsh, and Robert B. Meek, Jr. Also present were Diaconate Chairman, Steve Britt, and Deacons Calvin Reese, Larry Falls, and Ruben Trevino.

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ings as written and mailed to each Session member.

Steve Britt, Chairman of the Diaconate, gave the Deacons report and reviewed the minutes of the October 7, 2014 Deacons meeting, copies of which are appended to these minutes. A motion was M/S/A to approve the Deacons report, Deacons minutes, including changes to the previously approved 2015 Budget bringing the revised total to \$556,864.56, financial report and actions taken.

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A motion was M/S/A to allow the Clover High School Winter Guard to use the Family Life Center for indoor practice.

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A motion was made, seconded and approve to approve the following revision to WIC Officers/Chairpersons for 2015: Circle # 1 – Kay Jackson, Circle # 2 – Marianne Falls, Circle # 3 – Nicole Milks, Colleen Riddle Circle – Kathy Compton, President Elect – Meredith Clinton, MNA Co-chair – Holly Marsh, Christian Education Co-chair – Deb Thiessen.

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Our soldiers serving in Afghanistan, Europe & Iraq: John Rice (grandson of Joe & Phyllis Wysor) recovering from injuries from a roadside bomb explosion, Greg Sandifer, and Ted Trevino.

Charlotte Barnett, Monnie Blackman (C. Robinson's sister, lupus), Loma Burton, Abe Craddock (friend of J. LeMoyne, emphysema), Bob Currence, Zeke Dunbar (3 year old suffering from cancer, friend of M. Falls), Susan Heffner (cancer), Bob Kenley, Herb LeMoyne (J. LeMoyne's brother, Parkinson's disease), Rick Lindsay (Pastor of Scherer Memorial PCA, cancer), Harold McCarter, Jesse Patino (B. Love's brother-in-law, lymphoma), Jim Pittman (V. Linder's brother, prostate cancer, has spread to his spine), Sally Sturgis (T. Bowman's niece, melanoma), Bobby Wallace (effective cancer treatments), Clay West. Pray for our church and the Pastoral Search Committee.



Bethel Focus

Bethel Presbyterian Church, Organized 1764

In The Bleak Midwinter

THE EDITOR OF SCRIBNER'S MONTHLY needed a Christmas poem to fill out his December 1872 issue. He cast about for various authors to write something, but they all turned him down. Finally, he decided to solicit a poem from one of the most famous English poets of the period: Christina Rossetti.

Rossetti had come to fame 10 years before with her collection *Goblin Market and Other Poems* By 1872, she was diagnosed with Graves' disease and experienced significant pain. However, that did not stop her from writing poetry. And so, in response to the request from Scribner's, she sent a poem that started:

**In the bleak mid-winter,
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.**

Strictly speaking, December isn't a very snowy month in Bethlehem. December weather there is generally the same as central Mississippi: average highs in the low 60s, average lows in the low 40s.

While one can get a frost or even an occasional flurry — because Bethlehem sits at an elevation of 2,500 feet — one is unlikely to experience Rossetti's "bleak midwinter."



And yet, spiritually speaking, Bethlehem was experiencing a "bleak midwinter" 2,000 years ago. There had been silence for over 400 years. Indeed, the words of Amos had come true: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land —not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11). Not only this, the people still felt like they were in exile; even though they had come back to the Promised Land, they were dominated by foreign powers — Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece and now Rome. They were still looking for the promised Davidic King who would rule forever. And so, there was a sense of bleakness like the dreariness of winter as God's people wondered: Would He remember His promises? Would He deliver His people? Did He

care? God's people 2,000 years ago weren't alone in asking these questions. We wonder these same things; even as we are surrounded by Christmas cheer and promise, we see a landscape that looks bleak, frosty, cold and hard. We wonder if there would be any deliverance in the dead of our winter — will it be always winter and never Christmas? Will God deliver us? Does he care? That's where Christmas stories like Ruth help us, because while it was not the bleak midwinter physically in this story, it surely was both spiritually and emotionally. As we pay attention to Ruth's story, we see the patterns of God's grace that will lead us back to Bethlehem at Christmas and on to Calvary on Good Friday, that give us hope and joy in our challenging present, that point us for-

December 2014

Sermon Schedule

- 12/7 "The Danger of Not Forgiving" Mt. 18:21-35
- 12/14 "A Profound Announcement" Is. 9:1-7
- 12/21 "A Powerful Proclamation" Luke 2:8-21
- 12/28 Mr. Will Milks

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ward to God's final deliverance at the end of the age. THE BLEAKNESS OF EXILE After all, the opening chapter of Ruth and Naomi's story signals how bleak and hopeless their situation was. From the opening verse, we get a sense of difficulty. The difficulty was the result of inconsistent spiritual leadership from the judges who ruled Israel. Their spiritual failure brought divine judgment in the form of famine — God was using these difficult days, these bleak

All Events

December 2014

| Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|--|--|---|---|---|---|--|
| 30 | 01 Staff Meeting FLC Reserved - MOC | 02 Women's Bible Study FLC Reserved Diaconate Meeting | 03 FLC Reserved Basketball | 04 FLC Reserved | 05 FLC Reserved | 06 FLC Reserved Claire Allen Clover Women's Club Tour of... |
| 07 FLC Reserved Choir Practice Deacon's Fund Collection Congregational Meeting Kids' Quest Children's... | 08 Staff Meeting FLC Reserved Circle #3 | 09 FLC Reserved Ada Pursley Amber Lee Women's Bible Study | 10 FLC Reserved Good Samaritans Nativity Play Courtney Wyatt Margaret Ann Ferguson Rachel Meek Coleen Riddle Circle Basketball | 11 Andre Burns FLC Reserved | 12 Nicole Milks | 13 Sanctuary Reserved |
| 14 Choir Practice Corey Clinton Session Meeting | 15 Staff Meeting | 16 Women's Bible Study FLC Reserved | 17 Nancy Martin FLC Reserved Basketball | 18 FLC Reserved | 19 Bill Keller David Long | 20 Alex Dixon Bob Kenley |
| 21 Choir Practice Betsy Clinton | 22 Staff Meeting | 23 Abigail Ramsey Holly Broughton Scott Wallace | 24 Basketball | 25 Christmas Day FLC reserved | 26 Susie Harris | 27 |
| 28 Choir Practice | 29 Brenna Clinton Kirsten Allen Malize Wallace Staff Meeting | 30 Chris Griesman FLC Reserved | 31 Rett Mounts FLC Reserved Basketball | 01 | 02 | 03 |

days, to turn his people’s hearts back to himself (Ruth 1:1; Deuteronomy 28). The difficulty that Israel experienced generally was mirrored in Elimelech’s family particularly. Their departure from the Promised Land into the land of exile was a signal of their spiritual condition — like the rest of the country, they were doing what was right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25). And so, we aren’t surprised when their departure from God’s land brings about death (Ruth 1:3-5), as Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion all die in rapid succession, leaving no heirs and no support for their wives. All of this is tragic — Elimelech’s wife, Naomi, is exiled from Israel in a foreign

land, but she is alone. Her aloneness is not a problem merely from an emotional standpoint, but also from an economic one. Without husband or sons or grandsons, she faced destitution. Without her husband, sons or heirs, widows like Naomi were vulnerable economically, open to abuse or neglect without the provision and protection of a husband or son in a male-dominated society. As Naomi looked at her future, it was no wonder that she felt broken, bitter, bleak — it was like she was in the “very dead of winter.” Is there any hope in the midst of all this hopelessness?
THE BLESSEDNESS OF RETURN
 The Bible tells us that hope returns when

we return to the Lord. That’s exactly what Naomi experienced when she decided to return to Bethlehem from Moab. But why did she decide to return home to Bethlehem? “She heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food” (1:6). God had taken the initiative; He was drawing His people back to himself; He was on the move. The sign that this was the case was that there was food again. Could it be that the bleak midwinter was passing? Could it be that Christmas could be around the corner — the time of the Lord’s deliverance, the time when the Redeemer comes? Hope returns when we recognize that the Lord’s turn toward us is motivated by His



Session Minutes

The Session and Diaconate of Bethel Presbyterian Church met jointly on Sunday, November 9, 2014 at 2:00 PM in the Conference Room of the Family Life Center with Moderator, Rev. John Gess, for the regular scheduled joint quarterly meeting. The meeting was called to order and opened with reading of the Scriptures from Psalm 100 and prayer by the Moderator.

A quorum was present. Elders present: J. Brent Clinton, Christopher L. Wallace, Robert N. Boyd, Frank C. Falls, Robert C. Love, Jr., Steven H. Linder, D. Ross Love, W. Hampton Stowe, III, James G. Long, Timothy G. Marsh, and Robert B. Meek, Jr. Also present were Diaconate Chairman, Steve Britt, and Deacons Calvin Reese, Larry Falls, and Ruben Trevino.

A motion was M/S/A to approve the minutes of the October 5, 2014, October 15, 2014, October 19, 2014, and October 26, 2014 Session meetings, and the October 19, 2014 and November 2, 2014 Congregational meet-

ings as written and mailed to each Session member.

Steve Britt, Chairman of the Diaconate, gave the Deacons report and reviewed the minutes of the October 7, 2014 Deacons meeting, copies of which are appended to these minutes. A motion was M/S/A to approve the Deacons report, Deacons minutes, including changes to the previously approved 2015 Budget bringing the revised total to \$556,864.56, financial report and actions taken.

The Community Thanksgiving Service will be held at Scherer PCA on Sunday, November 23, 2014 at 7:00 PM.

A motion was M/S/A to allow the Clover High School Winter Guard to use the Family Life Center for indoor practice.

A motion was M/S/A to place the Bethel Church Directory on-line, for use by congregational members.

The children's Christmas play will be presented on Sunday, December 7, 2014.

A Class of 2018 officer ordination and

installation service will be held on Sunday, December 14, 2014.

A motion was M/S/A to call a Congregational meeting to be held after morning worship Sunday, December 7, 2014 for the purpose of presenting the 2015 Budget to the congregation and approving any changes in the Pastor's call. The Deacons were then dismissed, with prayer by Rev. Gess.

A motion was made, seconded and approve to approve the following revision to WIC Officers/Chairpersons for 2015: Circle # 1 – Kay Jackson, Circle # 2 – Marianne Falls, Circle # 3 – Nicole Milks, Colleen Riddle Circle – Kathy Compton, President Elect – Meredith Clinton, MNA Co-chair – Holly Marsh, Christian Education Co-chair – Deb Thiessen.

A motion was M/S/A to adjourn. The meeting was closed with prayer by James Long.

Robert C. Love, Jr.
Clerk of Session

In The Bleak Midwinter, continued

love. It is hinted at in Ruth 1 — it comes more clearly as the book unfolds. Here, the Lord's steadfast love is modeled in the steadfast love and loyalty demonstrated by Ruth as Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to return home, find new husbands and serve their Moabite gods. And she gives them a blessing: "May the Lord deal kindly with you (may the Lord show you *hesed*, covenant love, covenant loyalty) as you have dealt with the dead and with me" (1:8). In the end, Orpah returns to Moab, but Ruth remains. She "clung to Naomi" (1:14), a word that echoes back to Genesis 2:24. Ruth cleaved to Naomi in covenant love because Ruth had come to know God's covenant love for her (1:16-17). God's covenant love is expressed in promises — when Ruth says, "Your people shall be my people, and

your God my God," she was reiterating God's own covenant promise to His people: "You shall be my people and I shall be your God." And so, God's love, His covenant loyalty, expressed through Ruth's own covenant loyalty, was at the heart of His turn toward His people and toward Naomi. That's what turned Naomi's heart toward home and hope. The only place of hope for any of us is that the God of steadfast love has visited His people. And not just in Bethlehem in Ruth's time: over a thousand years later, Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, would sing, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68-69). The Lord has visited His people and raised up a horn of

salvation — His name is Jesus. And He was born in Ruth and Naomi's town, in Boaz's town, in David's town, as the true redeemer of God's people. Will you end your exile and return to Him? Will you say with Christina Rossetti at the end of her poem:

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 can I give him? Give him my heart.

Dr. Lucas is associate professor of church history at RTS-Jackson and senior minister at First Presbyterian Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Bethel Presbyterian Church

Presbyterian Church in America
Organized 1764

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Prayer Requests:

Pastor John Gess and Interns Will Milks and Jonathan Goundry as they preach and minister to the Bethel congregation, and for their families.

The Ashbaugh family, and the ministry of RUF at Winthrop.

The Lees as they seek to implement the Member Care Ministry for MTW Latin America, that the Lord will enable them to minister to the MTW missionaries of Latin America with compassion and humility; for the health of their daughter and granddaughter Amber & Tegan, who were in a severe car accident but received no major injuries. Pray for their upcoming travel.

Please pray for the Pulpit Committee and all facets of the search for Bethel's next pastor. Please pray that God would be glorified in the process

and for His provision for the church.

Session and Diaconate members, WIC officers, Sunday School teachers, Bible Study leaders, Youth leaders/teachers, giving thanks for their faithfulness and willingness to serve.

Missionaries throughout the world, as well as local ministries such as Habitat for Humanity, God's Kitchen, Clover Area Assistance Center and Biblical Studies Released Time. Please pray fervently for the work in Northern Mexico.

Pray for our nation, particularly the upcoming mid-term elections.

Pray for people who are afflicted by the Ebola outbreak, and for aid workers. Pray for effective treatment, containment and eradication of this terrible virus.

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