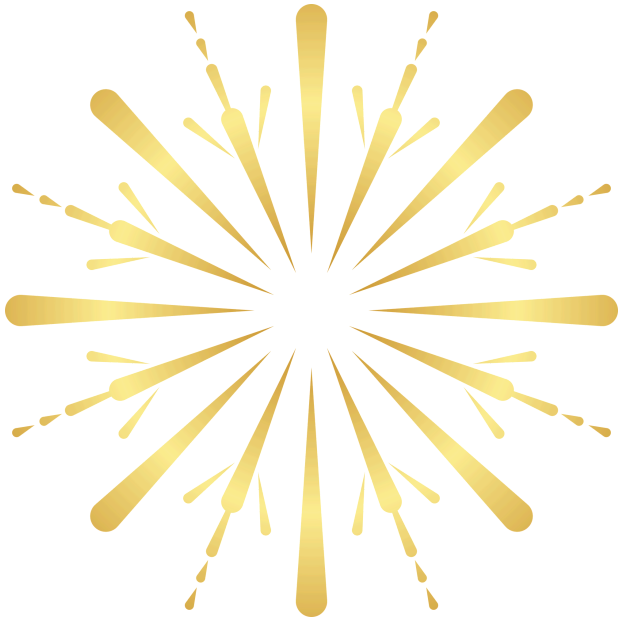


*Whoever you are,  
Wherever you are on life's journey,  
You are welcome here.*

JANUARY 2026 VOLUME 24 ISSUE 1

# THE NUGGET

Open Door United Church of Christ



Happy  
*New Year*  
**2026**

*We will be having our annual Family Game Night on New Year's Eve from 7 - 9pm. This is a beloved and fun event, we hope to see you there!*



*Our Annual Budget Meeting will take place on Sunday, January 25 after worship. This is a very important meeting for all members to attend!*

# Interim Thoughts



Have you noticed how angels are all over the Christmas story?

Should we believe in angels?

My friend Jason Micheli tells the story of a time in seminary when he confessed to one of his professors his struggle to believe in angels. It was shortly after the twin towers fell in NYC, and Jason thought it was time to move past fairy tales.

“Fairy tales?” Dr. Jacks asked, “You have trouble believing in angels?”

He didn’t wait for Jason to respond.

Instead, he told about a winter day a few years earlier. Heavy snow fell as dusk settled over New England. He and his wife were driving to their daughter’s house to visit when their car broke down. Cell phones were not yet a ubiquitous device, and Dr. Jacks and his wife were both old, too old to be early adopters of cell phones and too old to sit for long in an idle car in single digit weather.

“I was sitting behind the wheel,” he said to Jason, “reassuring my wife that all would be fine while I wondered how long we could sit in the car or how far I would get walking in the snow with a cane in one hand and my wife on my other hand.”

Jason squinted at him. Dr. Jacks leaned in closer and continued his story.

“All of a sudden, like an answered prayer, this young couple pulled up alongside us in a station wagon— the kind with wood paneling on the sides— and offered us a ride.”

“You got in the car with complete strangers?!”

He nodded.

“Of course, I...” and his voice trailed away as he recalled the incident, “I just knew.”

“You think those two were angels?” Jason asked

“Wait,” he said, “I’m not finished with my story.”

He sat back up and smiled and laughed a slight, joyful laugh.

“Twenty minutes later,” he said, “they dropped us off at our daughter’s house. She looked around her property as we climbed up the steps of her big front porch. I turned around and waved at the couple who had saved us and my daughter said, with alarm in her voice, “Dad, who are you waving to?” I told her, “The couple in the station wagon who drove us the rest of the way.”

And she said:

“Dad, there’s no one there. Look, there’s not even any tracks in the snow.”

Jason just stared at his seminary professor, dumbfounded.

“Don’t ever mistake the Nativity for a fairy tale,” Dr. Jacks said, pointing his long, bony finger at Jason.

Rev. Jason Micheli goes on to draw the theological nugget from his doubt. Quoting Jason, now:

“Flannery O’Connor writes that **“sentimentality is a distortion in the direction of an overemphasis on innocence, an early arrival at a mock state of innocence.”** Certainly our observances of Christmas have trained us to think of angels sentimentally— cherubs on cards, halos on children, harmonies floating politely above a stable scene.

But the gospels will not let us keep the angels cute.

The verb Matthew uses to describe Joseph considering what to do about Mary is the very same verb the evangelist will use to describe Herod’s rage at being bested by the fleeing wise men. That is, the angel staves off Joseph the Righteous Man doing something rash about his fiancé.

In Luke, the angels do not announce so much as intrude and interrupt.

Angels are not ambient.

They are dispatched.

They arrive because something in the story must not go wrong.

Angels never appear when the history God is making with us is safely on track. Angels appear only at what Robert Jenson calls **“ontologically perilous junctures.”**

As Karl Barth calls them, angels are **“God’s ambassadors, the opponents of God’s opponents.”**

They arrive when the future of God presses urgently upon the present.

The angels do not sing because the world is peaceful.

They sing because peace has been promised in the flesh of a child.

Glory to God in the highest,” they cry, “and on earth peace.”

This is not commentary.

It is proclamation.

We sing about angels at Christmas, but otherwise we fall silent. Our reticence aligns us more with Enlightenment skepticism than with biblical faith.

Yet Barth insists:

**“The angels are not an absurdity or curiosity which we are at liberty to reinterpret, to deny, or to replace.”**

We cannot remove the angels from the gospel without reducing it to ethics. If you demythologize the angels, you do not purify Christianity— you impoverish it.

The gospel begins with Gabriel’s announcement. The resurrection is announced by angels. The Jesus who teaches the Golden Rule is the same Jesus who is ministered to by angels in the wilderness and the garden. We would not know that Jesus lives with death behind him if an angel had not told us so.

Angels persist as a stubborn reminder that Christianity is not advice.

It is apocalypse.

It is God acting.

So what can we say about angels?

1. **They are creatures.** Heaven itself is created. Heaven is the space God makes in creation for himself. And angels are the creatures of that mode of creation. Just as we are creatures of earth, angels are creatures of heaven.

2. **They are servants.** We do not relate to them religiously. An angel with a will of its own is a demon. Angels exist only in obedience.

3. **They are immediate and immaterial.** As John of Damascus taught, they exist only in their coming and going—coming and going that just is God’s will.

Which means:

Angels are not explanations; angels are events.

Angels are events of God tweaking the plot of the story he is making with us. Angels are happenings of authorial intrusion. Angels are those points where eternity clips time. To get the story back on track, God sends angels.

Thus, the world is not a machine.

It is creation.

“Don’t ever mistake the story for a fairy tale,” Dr. Jack said, pointing his long, bony finger at me.

And then, before I got up to leave— I didn’t know it at the time— Dr. Jacks quoted the English poet W.H. Auden, **“Nothing that is possible can save us.”**

Speaking of angels, a cluster of angels descended upon Golden San Andreas Care Center on December 22. A splendid choir of adults and kids led the residents in singing Christmas carols and songs of the season. They then went room to room bearing gifts collected from you, the amazing people of Open Door UCC. This is how God shows up in the world, singing, bearing gifts, and being present to one another, and especially to those so often rendered invisible.

Sincere thanks to our Social Justice team, and to Lynne Bird in particular, who organized and directed the angels of Open Door.

And to Patty Haskell, Evelyn Butts, and everyone who participated in our “Christmas Pageant for Everyone” on December 21 st in worship. A full house, and what a time we had!

**“Aloha Kalikimaka me ka Hape Nū’ia”** (“Merry Christmas together with a Happy New Year.”)

Gary



# *Tuning in With Our Music Director*

Happy January! We have special music from the Handbell Choir and from soloist Liz Graham planned for you for the Epiphany celebration on January 11. After the Epiphany service the Handbell Choir will take a break until the end of February, when they will take up their bells again to begin preparing for Easter Sunday. Since handbells are not a drop-in ensemble, let me know right away if you are interested in joining the Bell Choir for Easter - each player is responsible for two or three notes, and the notes need to be assigned before rehearsals start up. It is wonderful teamwork, and a fun way to keep your brain - and arms! - in shape. Rehearsals will be on alternate Saturday mornings beginning the last weekend of February.

Singing is also an activity with many benefits, mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. You are always welcome to give the Vocal Choir a try. I post practice materials and schedules on <https://katemusic.com/choirod> (this page is not in the website menu, so you need to access it from the link) - check it out and see if there is anything of interest to you!

Regarding congregational singing: If you have a favorite hymn or response that you haven't sung in a while, let me know and Pastor Gary and I will find a good Sunday to sing it!

Taizé service: Join us for a service of Taizé chants and prayers on Wednesday, January 14 at 5 pm. The service is modeled on services held at the Taizé ecumenical community in France - and now around the world - since its founding in 1940.

## Music Lessons:

As we enter the new year, a reminder that I offer piano and music creativity lessons to people of all ages and levels. Please see <https://katemusic.com/music-lessons> for more information.

Musical Sanctuary: The experiment continues! Since there is interest in Musical Sanctuary from some Open Door members who cannot make it to the Sunday evening offerings, the day has been changed to Wednesday evenings at 5:30, still once a month. The January Musical Sanctuary will be on January 21, with the topic "Inner Guidance." The beginning of the year can be a time for evaluation, choices, decisions. We will explore accessing our higher wisdom for guidance, and the wisdom of "sitting in the question" when the path forward doesn't seem clear. Musical Sanctuary is free, but we do accept tax-deductible donations (that we share with Open Door - thank you for your generous support!).

All blessings,  
Kate





## *Vice-Moderator's Musings*

A new year. A fresh start? As we stand at the threshold of a new year, it's a perfect time to reflect on the blessings of the past year, and the challenges we are facing in the new year. It has been a year of big changes for our church, including the retirement of Rev. Bonnie Hollinger and Dr. Daryl Hollinger. We were indeed blessed to find Rev. Gary Percesepe and Kate Moody to lead our congregation during this major transition of our church. We have also been blessed with many wonderful people who have joined our congregation, and many who have stepped up to serve in various ways.



The love and support that we have shared with each other gave us opportunities to reach out, not only to each other, but also to the community and the world. I started to list the ways that we reached out this past year, but the list got too long to be included in this article. Our impact in our community is significant! And we continue to find new ways, large and small, to reach out. I am so grateful that our church is committed to serving in so many ways.

Looking forward, there are so many opportunities and great need for us to bring Jesus Christ's love and his message into our world. In the coming months, we will be looking at who God is calling us to become. This is a question that is an important part of our search for a settled pastor, and our efforts to answer this question will prompt a number of conversations, explorations, storytelling, and many prayers. This is a new beginning. This year, let's deepen our faith, strengthen each other, and engage fully with God's calling in our lives. Thanks to each of you for being a part of our church family. May God grant you renewed faith, purpose, and abundant joy in this new year.

Submitted by Barbara Olivier

## *Treasurer's Report*

At the time of me writing this, I don't have any end of the year numbers. I know that we had some generous contributions for the end of the year, totaling \$8500. We will be meeting early in January to continue working on the 2026 budget and will present this budget at the Congregation Meeting on January 25th. Please don't hesitate to call if you have any ideas or questions about the budget.

Happy New Year, Patty

## *Christian Education Recap*

It has been a busy holiday season. We had a wonderful turn out for our Christmas pageant. It was fun having the adults participate with the youth. The following day we joined a group from our Church at Golden Nursing home for caroling and gift giving. Santa was even there! Then the next day, Tuesday, we helped set up the Murphys Community Christmas dinner. We helped set up tables, set tables, move boxes of mashed potatoes and anything else they needed. After all that hard work we enjoyed lunch at Firewood. Pastor Gary and Resea joined us and were put to work also. We ended the year with our game night on December 31st. Looking forward to a quieter January. Happy New year to all. Patty



# Poet's Corner

## "For the Time Being," by W.H. Auden

The second world war raged on; the poet lost his mother, and also experienced the heartbreak of unrequited love. English poet W.H. Auden was going through it. In the process, he rediscovered his faith. The fitting response to the darkness and despair and apathy around him, Auden thought, was the Christmas event. So he set to work on a Christmas Oratorio called "For the Time Being." Originally meant to be performed and sung, the poem is a stark retelling of the Christmas narrative, cleansed of all the Hallmark sentimentality. Says Jeff Reimer in this wonderful podcast, "Auden's modernist poetry becomes a way for a modern humanity—whose resources are spent, whose plans have gone awry, whose hopes have been misplaced, whose sense of time has been unwound—to find redemption amidst the quotidian, the mundane, and the everyday. But also always in an eternally full "moment of decision"—a response to the bare fact of the Incarnation of God in infant Jesus." Here is an excerpt from Auden's "For the Time Being," as read in our worship service on December 28:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,  
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—  
Some have got broken—and carrying them up to the attic.  
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,  
And the children got ready for school. There are enough  
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—  
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,  
Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—  
To love all of our relatives, and in general  
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again  
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed  
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable  
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,  
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,  
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.  
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,  
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware  
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought  
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now  
Be very far off.

What do we do for the time being? Here's how Auden puts it:  
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.  
For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly  
Outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be  
Grew up when it opened. Now, recollecting that moment  
We can repress the joy, but the guilt remains conscious;  
Remembering the stable where for once in our lives  
Everything became a You and nothing was an It.  
And craving the sensation but ignoring the cause,  
We look round for something, no matter what, to inhibit  
Our self-reflection, and the obvious thing for that purpose  
Would be some great suffering.

In his commentary on the poem, Jeff Reimer notes that Auden was well aware of his temptation to turn his back on the present, consumed by yearning for an idealized past. “In the final, short section of the poem, however, discourse on the present gives way to the future, as the Chorus instructs those of us who share Auden’s disposition with three imperative verbs—follow, seek, love. It is in carrying out these actions under the corresponding conditions of Unlikeness, Anxiety, and Flesh that we will gain fruitful reentry into the world for the time being—not the world as it was or as we would like it to be, but as it is.”

This is the world God is redeeming. Auden closes his poem with these words:

**He is the Way.**

**Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;**

**You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.**

**He is the Truth.**

**Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;**

**You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.**

**He is the Life.**

**Love Him in the World of the Flesh;**

**And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.**



# WHAT IS THE SEASON OF EPIPHANY IN THE CHURCH?

Those seeking a splendid introduction to the meaning of the Season of Epiphany are invited to look at Rev. Fleming Rutledge's wonderful little book, *Epiphany*.

Here is a review of the book by Alex Joyner, pastor of Charlottesville First United Methodist Church in Charlottesville, Virginia.

There's a temptation in churches to use the season after Christmas as an accessible on-ramp for people prone to life hack their lives in a new year. Alongside Dry January, a preacher might offer a sermon series on '6 Ways to Up Your Spiritual Game in 2024.' I don't even know what that means, but it sounds...productive. Inconveniently for such well-intentioned attempts to enter the marketplace of resolutions, the calendar of the Christian year gives us Epiphany, an obscure season that puts the glory of God in Christ on full display instead of our soon-to-be-well-toned arms.

"In most religious (or "spiritual") approaches, our human capacities are at the forefront. Contrarily, in biblical theology God is the subject of the sentences about himself. He is not an object of our perception. He originates our perception, guides our perception, corrects our perception" (33-4).

Leave it to Fleming Rutledge to overturn the apple cart on another church season. Rutledge, who has quickly become the patron saint of Advent in many mainline Protestant churches following her 2018 sermon collection, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, has gained prominence for her thoroughgoing apocalyptic reading of scripture. As outlined in her magisterial work, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus*, the theological worldview of Paul and the early Church was shot through with the language of spiritual conflict and the ultimate victory of God over the forces of sin and death. That conflict is always in the background, providing dramatic energy that is often glossed over in our soft lights and sentimental music approach to the Christmas season.

In *Epiphany: The Season of Glory*, the latest entry in the *Fullness of Time Series* edited by Esau McCauley, Rutledge lifts up Epiphany as a season ripe for reclamation. "This special emphasis of Epiphany [on deliverance and translation to the Kingdom of God] is needed by the church right now as a drowning person needs a lifeboat," (44) she says. Far from needing one more program to achieve peak efficiency, what we receive from this season is the knowledge that "there is no road to the glory of God through human seeking; it cannot be summoned by human endeavor." (38)

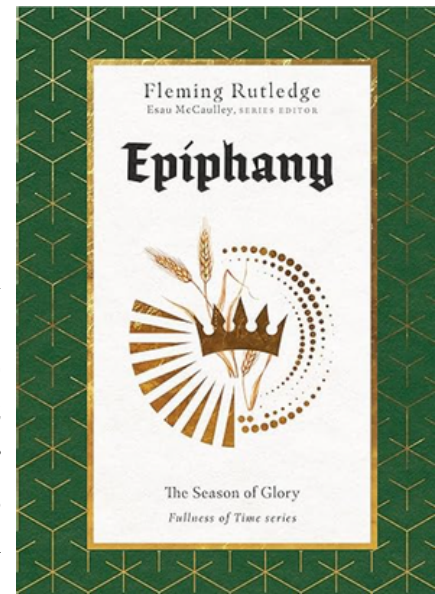
Instead, between the Day of Epiphany on January 6 and the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday, we get a primer on Jesus Christ. The season "offers an opportunity to focus for several weeks on the glory of Christ as the second person of the Trinity, in all his intrinsic, immutable, inestimable glory, which can never pass away" (28).

Putting the focus where it belongs doesn't mean that our lives aren't transformed. The traditional readings of the Epiphany season—the visit of the Magi, the baptism in the Jordan, and the water- to-wine wedding at Cana—all result in people's lives being turned around. As Jesus is manifested, humans find their own vocation as those who give God glory.

Near the end of this pocket-sized book, Rutledge turns to the question of a faithful observance of Epiphany. What shall we do in response to this encounter with God's glory in Christ? Perhaps we wouldn't be so caught up in the apparatus of church if we were more about the wonder. As Rutledge says, "Instead of training its members to be on committees, [Richard Lischer] writes, the pastors and leaders of congregations would be training the congregation to be pastors, 'caring for one another in the stress and conflict of daily life'" (115).

It's hard not to be caught up in the self-improvement industry that rumbles back to life this time each year. We dream of being the efficient, accomplished people that we're told we can be through our own efforts. But perhaps we're not that able and God doesn't depend upon us to be ready before acting. "God is not dependent upon us," Rutledge says, "but—amazing as it may seem—he rejoices in us" (143.)

Welcome back, Fleming. You're welcome in every season.





# Christmas Pageant 2025

On December 21, our congregation was blessed during worship with a multi-generation Christmas Pageant. The altar was beautiful, the children were adorable, and the adults showcased their wonderful talents.









# *Spreading Christmas Cheer*

The Outreach and Social Justice Team (with many thanks to Lynne Bird!), along with other church members and friends, ventured out in the pouring rain on December 22 to celebrate the warmth and love of the season with residents at Golden Nursing Home.









# *Serving Our Community*

As is the tradition of our wonderful congregation, the Christian Enrichment team served a free Christmas meal to our community members right here in Murphys.





*Cherishing our members, friends, and  
community...*

**HAPPY BIRTHDAY!**

Rebecca Boyett 1

Jeff Kelly 5

Ava Armstrong 7

Joe Jackson 13

Janis Ossa-Nielsen 18

Andrew Oneto 18

Dustin Shinn 18

Pat LaMont 19

Connie Bowser 24

Norman Nielsen 26

Joan Thorsen 27

Janet Reynolds 30

*Don't see your birthday  
listed? We promise it isn't on  
purpose! If you would like to  
have your special day listed  
in the newsletter, please call  
or email the church office.*

## Prayer List

**The scriptures tell us:**

**“And my God will meet all your  
needs according to the riches of  
his glory in Jesus Christ.”**

**Philippians 4:19**

***We continue to witness the  
stories of how God answers our  
prayers!***

***God hears our cries and answers  
them.***

***Let us pray daily for the  
following members and friends  
of our community:***

Faye Morrison

Miriam Thorsen

Jodie Gibson

David Nak (Alan Horvath)

Shoshana (Laura Leonard)

Danielle, Lauren, Emre, Willow (Jesse Hampton)

Tracey Ellifritz

Tabitha Kremesec

Shirley Soderer

Bonnie Danielson (Mark McCormick)

Terry Dowell

Bob Olivier

Robin Chesnut

Tari Takara

Ben Richardson (LaMonts)

Bruce (Miriam Thorsen)

Dodi Horvath

Brian Whitehead (Nancy Burton)

Rev. John Randlett

Rev. Marty Williams

# JANUARY

# 2026



Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
28	29	30	31	1	2	3
<b>9am</b> Vocal Choir rehearsal <i>Holy Communion</i> <b>11am</b> Small Group leader mtg., EEC	<b>6:30pm</b> Al-Anon	<b>10:30am</b> Pastor Search mtg., Fisk <b>12:30pm</b> Budget mtg.,EEC	<b>8:15am</b> Morning Prayer, Zoom <b>10am</b> Worship mtg. Zoom <b>12:30pm</b> AA <b>6:30pm</b> AA		<b>12pm</b> Women's AA <b>2pm</b> First Fridays	<b>10am</b> Bell Choir rehearsal
<b>9am</b> Vocal Choir rehearsal	<b>12:30pm</b> CE mtg, Zoom <b>5:30pm</b> South Grove Bunch <b>6:30pm</b> Al-Anon		<b>8:15am</b> Morning Prayer, Zoom <b>12:30pm</b> AA <b>5pm</b> <i>Taizé</i>		<b>10am</b> The Wanderers <b>12pm</b> Women's AA	
<b>11am</b> Council mtg, EEC		<b>10:30am</b> Family Connections. EEC <b>5:30pm</b> The Seekers	<b>8:15am</b> Morning Prayer, Zoom <b>5:30pm</b> Musical Sanctuary <b>12:30pm</b> AA <b>6:30pm</b> AA	<b>10am</b> Faith & Friends	<b>12pm</b> Women's AA	
<b>9am</b> Vocal Choir rehearsal <b>Annual Budget Meeting</b>	<b>6:30pm</b> Al-Anon		<b>8:15am</b> Morning Prayer, Zoom <b>12:30pm</b> AA <b>6:30pm</b> AA		<b>12pm</b> Women's AA	

God's love echoes through us to all creation.  
Webpage: [www.fccmurph.org](http://www.fccmurph.org)  
Email: [nugget@fccmurph.org](mailto:nugget@fccmurph.org)  
Phone: (209)728-3141

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Murphys, CA 95247

THE NUGGET



[www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org)

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Secretary Jenny Fuqua  
Custodian Lucie Tardif  
Christian Ed Director Patty Haskell  
Childcare Abby Fuqua

#### Officers

Moderator Carrie Shinn  
Vice Moderator Barbara Olivier  
Treasurer Patty Haskell  
Assistant Treasurer Alan Horvath

#### FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, MURPHYS MISSION STATEMENT

We believe that all people are beloved by God and we strive to serve as a welcoming and nurturing church community to discern the Bible with insight for today and to live out Christ's teachings.

The Nugget Committee invites you to submit articles of interest and wishes to stress that the deadline is always the 20th of each month.

The Committee reserves the right to edit submissions for length and content.