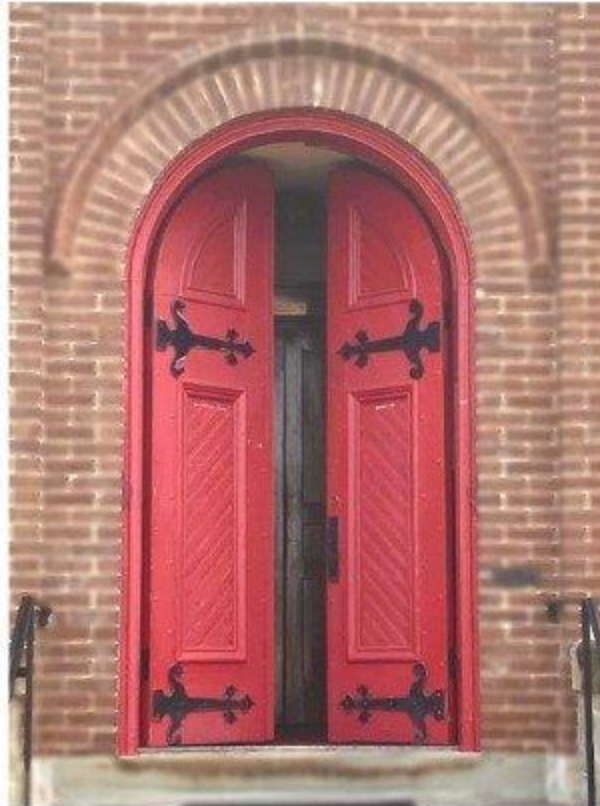


✠ ST. STEPHEN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

# *Beyond* The *Red* Door



## **MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR**

By E. Ray Walker

Foremost, Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus and the feast of the Incarnation. Think, a newborn baby in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Oh holy night.

The celebration has evolved since that precious event in the little town of Bethlehem 2,025 years ago.

Today, Christmas has become a global holiday, spiritually, for sure, and also secularly, think Santa and Black Friday.

In the little town of Culpeper, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church goes all out to make Jesus' birthday memorable. In fact, Christmas scenes are major features of the church building.

Walk through our beloved red front door and pause just inside the sanctuary. Look to your left. There, on the wall opposite the Peterkin Memorial Hall (Parish Hall), are stained-glass windows. The second and third, depict parts of the Christmas story.

The first, "The Feast of the Annunciation," is based on Luke 1:26-38 in which the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear the Messiah.

All burials are treated equally, with reverence. This follows the Episcopal tradition of common burial. During the service of committal, the officiant pours the ashes directly into the ground and then covers them with earth ("earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust").

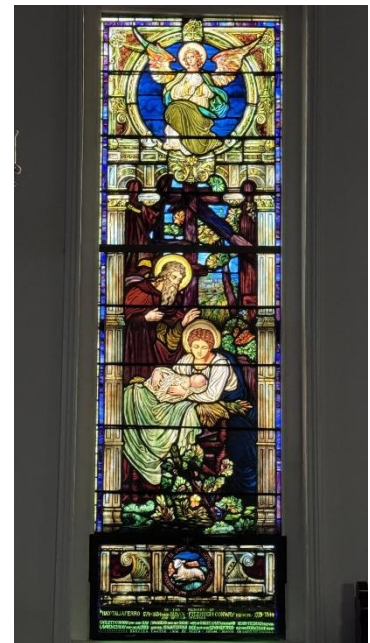
The second, "The Nativity," is based on Luke 2:16 and has several significant images.

— At the top, an angel has a cross over his head. It appears to be three branches of a Maltese Cross, a cross with four spearheads with points at the center. This cross is an emblem of St. John the Baptist.

—On the right, the buildings of Bethlehem are seen in the background.

—Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus fill the middle of the window.

—The most familiar symbol in this window is at the bottom — the lamb. It has several meanings. First, it is a symbol for Jesus Christ, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Second, the lamb also stands for John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ. Third, the lamb represents us, as lost sheep, needing the love and care of Christ, the Good Shepherd.



(The interpretations of the meanings of the windows come from "Behind the Red Door: A Bicentennial History of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church," 2014.)

## IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS

Come Christmas Eve, St. Stephen's will be aglow with candles and festive decorations. All merry and bright.

"It is all tradition in respect for SSEC being the most beautiful sanctuary in Culpeper," said Randy Jones, the head of the church's Altar Guild. Traditional red and green colors will dominate.



Do you see what I see? Poinsettias!!! Come, let us adore them.

Dozens of potted red poinsettias, purchased by St. Stephen's members as memorials or in honor of an individual, will adorn the church.

Poinsettias have rich spiritual meanings. They symbolize the Star of Bethlehem, the star that guided the three wise men to Jesus. They also represent the blood of Christ (red leaves) and purity (white leaves).

A popular legend tells of a poor Mexican girl who had no gift for Jesus, but her humble bouquet of weeds was miraculously transformed into a beautiful poinsettia, known as the "Flower of the Holy Night."

In other contexts, they signify hope, rebirth, peace and goodwill.

In advance of the Christmas season, there will be a brass-polishing party on December 9, at 9 a.m., to make the St. Stephen's sanctuary sparkle. Volunteers are welcome to help make the work easier.

There will be some permanent materials, such as the garland on the arch. The windowsill arrangements feature fresh greens, globes and candles. The altar arrangements are fresh red poinsettias, and the altar linens are changed from Advent purple to Christmas white.

Traditional touches include the large brass candelabra holding seven lighted candles each. Fresh greens will accent the brass railing in the pulpit. Greens and red poinsettias

will hang from the balcony over the aisle in front of the organ pipes. Greens and poinsettias will hang in the Narthex.

The Della Robia swags on the front doors are hung the first day of Advent, “in memory of my mother,” Randy says. (This is Randy’s 50th year decorating the sanctuary.)

Enchantment abounds. Have yourself a merry little Christmas.

Traditional touches include the large brass candelabra holding seven lighted candles each. Fresh greens will accent the brass railing in the pulpit. Greens and red poinsettias will hang from the balcony over the aisle in front of the organ pipes. Greens and poinsettias will hang in the Narthex.

The Della Robia swags on the front doors are hung the first day of Advent, “in memory of my mother,” Randy says. (This is Randy’s 50th year decorating the sanctuary.)

Enchantment abounds. Have yourself a merry little Christmas.

## **HAVE A HOLLY, JOLLY CHRISTMAS**

Other popular Christmas greens are holly and mistletoe.

Holly can be grown in most places, making it one of the few plants that can withstand extreme temperatures. Holly plants are noted for their attractive red berries and glossy, sharp-toothed green leaves, which remain on the plant year-round.



The holly bush represents immortality, a trait that God has given to each human being. We are all destined to live forever, either with the Lord or separated from Him. The sharp-toothed edge of the holly leaf reminds Christians of the crown of thorns with which the soldiers mocked Jesus during His Passion.

As a Christmas symbol, the red holly berry represents Christ’s blood, shed for all people, including those who reject Him.



So, deck the halls.

Mistletoe is an aerial parasite that has no roots. It lives off the tree to which it attaches itself, and, without that tree, it would die.

The Christmas tradition of mistletoe kissing has roots in ancient Celtic and Roman beliefs about the plant's symbolism of love, fertility and life.

These beliefs evolved over centuries, eventually becoming the custom of kissing under mistletoe, with early versions allowing men to kiss any woman under the plant or requiring the plucking of a berry for each kiss until all the berries were gone.



The tradition was popularized in England and later spread to the United States, appearing in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."

So, smoochies to all.

## **SO THIS IS CHRISTMAS ...**

In addition to the traditional family-friendly Christmas festivities, St. Stephen's will host other events, two of which are notable: Blue Christmas and the Charles Dickens Dinner.

### **BLUE CHRISTMAS (Do You Feel What I Feel?)**

For some, "joy to the world" may seem remote during the Christmas season. Real life occasionally interferes with the popular script. Hence, there is "Blue Christmas," a quiet, contemplative worship service for those experiencing grief, loss or sadness during the Christmas season.

It offers a space for reflection and prayer with others who may feel disconnected from the usual holiday cheer, acknowledging that the season can be painful for many.

These services often take place near the winter solstice and include elements like candle lighting, quiet music and scripture readings.



St. Stephen's will have a Blue Christmas service on Sunday, December 21, at 6 p.m.



Key aspects of a Blue Christmas service:

**Acknowledgement of grief:** The service provides a sacred space to acknowledge feelings of loss, loneliness and sadness, rather than trying to hide them.

**Focus on hope:** It is not just about sorrow; it is also a service of hope. The service offers comfort by reminding people that they are not alone.

The service is open to anyone who needs a moment of quiet reflection or solace, whether due to the death of a loved one, divorce, illness or general stress and sadness during the holidays.

### **DICKENS DINNER (God Bless Us, Every One)**

Christmas traditions thrive. Nativity scenes, for sure. Decorated trees, absolutely. Christmas carols and egg nog, yes and yes.

And, St. Stephen's has its own tradition: The yearly Charles Dickens Dinner.

Closely aligned with the Cratchit family's Christmas dinner in Dickens' 1843 classic "A Christmas Carol" (think Ebenezer Scrooge), the St. Stephen's dinner will serve hors d'oeuvres; goose, turkey and prime rib roast; various sides; desserts; and wines and assorted beverages.

The public is invited. There is no cost for this event, but attendees are *encouraged* to make a generous donation.

Now in its fourth year, the Dickens Dinner is spearheaded by Lina Frank. “Our theme this year will emphasize the Victorian elements, natural and rustic decorations, and specific motifs from the story,” Lina says. There will be a “festive atmosphere with touches of poverty,” she adds.

The Parish Hall will be decorated with evergreens and red poinsettias.



An event of this scope is expensive. “Yes! It is a bit pricey,” Lina says, “however, I have parishioners who over the past years have been very supportive and generous with their donations. This event funds itself.”

The Culpeper community is invited. “Since, for the most part, a church often serves as a central hub for community support, offering various forms of assistance beyond spiritual guidance, a dinner such as the Dickens Dinner is also one more way for the church to give back and also bring the community together,” Lina says.

Parishioners can contact the church office if they want to contribute.

## **THE BEST TIME OF THE YEAR**

Mark your calendar now for Christmas season events at St. Stephen's:



**St. Stephen's Advent Schedule**

**November 30 - Advent 1**

- Morning Prayer
- Wreath Making 9:00 AM

**December 7 - Advent 2**

- Blessing of the Coats
- Culpeper Christmas Parade

**December 14 - Advent 3**

- 8:00 AM Holy Communion
- 10:30 AM Lesson and Carols
- Blessing of the Angel Tree gifts

**December 21 - Advent 4**

- Cookie Exchange
- Caroling 2:00
- Blue Christmas 6:00 PM

The graphic features a festive border at the top and bottom with green pine branches, red berries, and gold ornaments. The background is light gray with white snowflake patterns.



**St. Stephen's Christmas Schedule**

**December 24 - Christmas Eve**

- Christmas Pageant 5:00 PM
- Birthday Party for Jesus 6:00 PM
- Carols to the Holy Family 9:30 PM
- Christmas Eucharist 10:00 PM
- Christmas Toast & Reception 11:15 PM

**December 25 - Christmas Day**

- Spoken Eucharist Rite II 10:30 AM

The graphic features a border at the top with green pine branches, white lights, and heart-shaped ornaments. The background is light gray with white snowflake patterns.