



# Musical Minute

A compilation of Musical Minutes  
shared during the year 2022

McAllister Memorial  
Presbyterian Church

900 N. Alleghany Avenue  
Covington, VA 24426

## Musical Minute:



When I came back to play at McAllister in 2017, one of the things that I most looked forward to was rekindling old friendships after having been away from the area for more than 20 years. While we've all changed and grown, it has been so rewarding and comforting to step back into the fold of the McAllister church family. An unexpected benefit to returning was forging a new friendship with our church secretary, Janet Linkenhoker. From my very first day back, Janet has been a supportive and kind coworker. As we interacted over church matters, it didn't take us long to realize that we have a great deal in common and a personal bond was quickly formed.

I have always appreciated Janet's professional approach to her work, her gentle and calm demeanor (In my experience she is basically unflappable!), and her meticulous attention to detail. We have pored over hundreds of bulletins and scores of newsletters together over the last almost five years looking for the elusive typo hiding in plain sight! She was instrumental during the Organ Restoration Fund campaign, keeping track of hundreds of donations, large and small, and acknowledging in writing every individual who contributed. She provided me almost weekly with lists of names so that I could keep up with my own thank you notes. Once when I arrived to play for a funeral service, I was stopped by a family member and asked if I could "type this up" so that it could be placed in the casket with his family member. It was an inspirational quote that he had seen on his way to the church that day that had touched his heart in a meaningful way. I promptly gave it to Janet (with my apologies for the late notice) and she returned within minutes with the quote beautifully and tastefully printed on heavy card stock. She is a virtual vault of institutional memory when it comes to McAllister and over these last years, I have relied on her to fill me in on events—births, marriages, deaths, etc.—that took place during the decades I missed. I know that in addition to the many tasks on which we've worked together, Janet wears many other hats in her role as church secretary and treasurer. Which is why we will all miss her when she soon leaves us to begin her new adventures as a retiree.

Janet is a real renaissance woman with a wealth of talents and a variety of interests. She is naturally inquisitive and has never stopped learning or exploring. She is a gifted artist, jewelry maker, skilled seamstress, cake decorator extraordinaire, gardener, dedicated wife,

mother, and grandmother, and I'm sure she is many other things that I don't even know about. In other words, the woman has things to do and places to go! Thank you, Janet, for your love and support over the last years. Your friendship is a source of strength and joy to me. I wish you health and happiness as you start this exciting new chapter in your life. Godspeed!

Beth



April 2022

McAllister Messenger

## Musical Minute:

In 1997 Andy and I had the opportunity to spend a meaningful and memorable (it was so cold!) Easter in the city of Cracow (Kraków), Poland. For years we'd been told of the beauty of the city and its importance in Polish history, and we finally decided to take a three-day weekend to investigate this jewel about 200 miles from our home in the Czech Republic.

At the time we visited, Pope John Paul II, the first Pole ever elected to the papacy was still in the Vatican. Easter is a huge celebration in predominantly Catholic Poland anyway, but the fact that a native son was the current Pope made the seasonal joy in Cracow even more palpable. There were banners featuring the Pope's benevolent countenance throughout town and excitement pervaded the atmosphere as individuals and families prepared for the upcoming festivities. All day Saturday and throughout the evening, we saw streams of people carrying baskets, pouring in and out of the many churches around the city center. (Wikipedia states that there are at least 120 Catholic Churches in Cracow.) Holding items for the Easter feast the following day the baskets were brought to the church to be blessed by the priest. In addition to decorated hard-boiled eggs (pisanki in Polish), ham, smoked sausage, horseradish root and other traditional foodstuffs, a requisite item in the basket was the traditional Easter babka, a sort of turban-shaped, ridged, slightly sweetened (and delicious) yeast cake baked in a traditional babka (bob-ka) mold. I was happily introduced to babka when I married into Andy's family and babka and I have been good friends ever since! We have the recipe that Andy's mother used, made all the more special because it was given to her by a dear family friend. Andy makes beautiful babkas and over the years I have also learned to make his mom's babka. Any of you who are accustomed to working with yeast dough will find the recipe very approachable. As with many yeast breads, there is a bit of time involved (most of it resting time for the dough), but the technique itself is not

difficult, especially if you have a sturdy mixer (which I am quite certain most Polish housewives throughout the centuries did not have!). Anyway—if you’re feeling up to some “armchair” travel and a little work in the kitchen, I present you with the recipe for Anna Monseu Dreszer’s Easter Babka, courtesy of the Dreszer’s longtime family friend, Sally Mroczek. If it turns out well, and it absolutely should, you can bring it by the church and maybe Pastor Jim will bless it for you!

## Easter Babka

Yield: I use 2 approximately 9-cup fluted Bundt pans. You can also use one large pan and two smaller ones for gift giving.

2 Cups milk	Rind of one lemon
2 Cups flour	2 teaspoons vanilla or 1 teaspoon rum flavoring
3 pkgs. Dry yeast or 3 fresh yeast cakes	6 cups flour
¼ cup lukewarm water	½ teaspoon mace
15 egg yolks	½ lb. white raisons
1 lb. melted butter or oleo	1 cup sugar

Method: In step # 8, use a wooden spoon to beat dough until it no longer clings. (Or beat on low/medium speed with a heavy-duty mixer until the flour is incorporated.)

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. Scald milk and cool
3. Dissolve yeast in warm water
4. Add yeast/water mixture to cooled milk, stir
5. Add 2 cups of flour, blend well
6. In a separate bowl, beat egg yolks with a whisk until thick and lemon colored. Add to yeast mixture. Cover; allow to rise until doubled in bulk.
7. Add melted butter, sugar, flavorings, and lemon rind to above mixture. Stir.
8. Sift flour (6 cups) and mace together, reserving a small amount of the flour mixture to toss with the raisins before adding. Add flour mixture to the above yeast/butter mixture.
9. Work in raisins.
10. Fill well-greased pans half full. Let rise about 1 hour.

Bake at 400 degrees for 15 minutes. Lower heat to 350 degrees. Bake 20 to 30 minutes longer, until done and the top is light golden brown. (If using small pans, check bread earlier.) If desired, while still warm, brush with confectioner’s sugar and milk glaze or sprinkle with plain confectionary sugar.

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Enjoy your babka on Easter morning with loved ones alongside a cup of tea or a strong cup of coffee. But don't get too comfortable. Easter Monday brings Śmigus Dingus (Lany Poniedziałek or Wet Monday) when anyone, but especially women and girls can be doused with water and switched (gently, of course) on the legs with pussy willows! As Poles wish one another at Easter, "Wesołych Świąt Wielkanocnych!" or "Wesołego Alleluja!" Happy Easter!

Beth

May 2022

McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

Spring's stealth never fails to astonish me. As winter has its last hurrah—and this year it fooled us on several occasions only to come roaring back with a vengeance—we eagerly await any sign that the weather will soon turn. For us, one of the first signs of spring's promise is the strappy foliage of the daffodils, stubbornly and persistently emerging from the leaf debris under the oak trees. How miraculous to see the pale buds form as we anxiously look for that early hint of color, sometimes convincing ourselves it's there when, in fact, we still have weeks to wait.

While we were living overseas and long before Andy retired, we made the decision that Virginia would one day be our forever home. Not knowing when that day might arrive, we occasionally perused online real estate listings from Alleghany, Bath, and Highland counties. It was a fun exercise, but retirement seemed far away, and we weren't particularly focused on the search. At the same time, mom kept her eyes and ears open for places closer to Covington that we might one day call home. In mid-2004, she shared a listing from the *Virginian Review* with us. We were interested enough that mom arranged to have someone come and take photos of the house and send them to us online. (This was before the days that virtual tours of homes were standard.) We were so intrigued by the photos that we rearranged our scheduled visit for that year and flew home to see the place. With the help of mom and others, we closed on our new home in October of 2004, almost six years before I would return to Covington after mom's terminal cancer diagnosis.

As you well know, an empty house still requires tending, and this arrangement worked only thanks to mom and an army of helpers, most importantly our neighbors, various members of the Jackson family. They not only kept an eye on the house, but they also kept an eagle eye on mom, assuring the safety of her comings and goings. While there was a lot that we couldn't do with the house until we were in residence, my husband the former forester knew that even in our absence, things could still grow. (Well—things that deer, rabbits, and squirrels don't eat!)

We enlisted the help of W.L. Dressler, a skilled plantsman and landscaper, and an absolute warrior when it came to battling our rocky soil. Andy and W.L. sketched out the first round of foundation plantings and Andy made sure to include daffodils—lots of daffodils! W.L. continued to help out each year we were away, and Andy took advantage of each home visit to make additional plantings, clean up derelict areas around the house, and plant a new tree or two. Almost every year since we've been home, Andy continues to plant daffodil bulbs each fall and thanks to the varieties he's chosen, we now have about a six-week window with daffodils in bloom. I love the vegetables, herbs, and colorful annuals of summer, but they all require frequent maintenance and oversight. The daffodils, iris, and peonies that we've planted over the years and the native redbud, dogwood, and spring wildflowers simply come up of their own accord and on a schedule that only they know. They bring us such joy! It reminds me of "Hymn of Promise," the Natalie Sleeth song that has become a "perennial" favorite at McAllister:

"In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;  
In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!  
In the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be,  
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

Many of you are dedicated and skilled gardeners and I know you've spent years and even decades tending and nurturing your flowers and vegetable gardens as well as community gardens. The beauty of this spring arrived with more than a fair share of turmoil in the world, and it amazes me how the rhythms of nature roll along regardless. Gardeners plant, cross their fingers, and have faith. And God and Mother Nature don't fail us. I hope that by looking out your own window over the coming weeks, you'll find joy deep in your soul and peace in your heart.

Take good care. Beth

## Musical Minute:

Like most everyone, I find that the older I get, the more fleetly the days and months speed by. I know that each day still contains 24 hours, but I'm beginning to guess that someone has lessened the minutes per hour without telling me. Nowhere is the stealthy advance of time more apparent to me than when I drive west on Oak Street to cross under the railroad overpass. When I crest the hill at the stoplight directly across from Covington High School I am faced with a majestic row of towering trees. These beauties were mere saplings when they were planted. This I know because they were a gift to the school from the graduating class of 1983—*my* graduating class.

Although I can scarce believe the number of years that have had to pass for the trees to acquire their impressive stature, I'm afraid that there is visual proof in the 1983 edition of Puffs and Patches. There I am pictured on a blustery day with the other class officers grouped around one of the newly planted trees. (One of my fellow officers is my buddy Leslie Powell Nicely—Joe and Pat Martin's daughter!) We all look so young. I'm not sure who thought up the idea of giving trees as the class gift. I think it was determined with the input of the officers, our classmates and advisors, and a few parents. Regardless, it was a good idea. I remember that we all felt proud knowing that the class of 1983's contribution would enhance the school facade and Lexington Avenue for years to come. Years to come ... In our youthful naïveté I'm not sure at the time that we had any true comprehension of what that phrase really meant. Many of those "years to come" have long since passed and I now know that it means those trees have been in the ground for nearly 40 years and I am no longer seventeen years old.

Leaving the trees aside for the moment, any drive down Lexington Avenue is a journey back in time for me. Following my birth, I came home to my big brother Nicky at 214 N. Lexington. A few years later we moved to 220 N. Lexington, and when I was sixteen, we moved to 111 N. Lexington. (The final move was made while I was on a high school Spanish Club trip to Mexico. The family joke was that they intentionally moved without telling me, but that they should have moved further as I still managed to find them when I returned home!) My grandparents Leitch resided at 318 N. Lexington during my childhood and my great grandparents Loving were just around the corner on Riverside. What a blessing to grow up with grandparents and great grandparents a brief walk away. A trip down Lexington brings memories of games of tag and catching "lightening bugs" on dusky summer nights, sleepovers with friends, and holiday meals and celebrations with aunts, uncles, and cousins

at my grandparents. My great grandparents often hosted Saturday breakfasts, the table laden with food and elegant china, the jams and jellies decanted into cut crystal bowls. I remember being picked up for my first fancy dress dance in high school, working on a piñata made of bleached board and crepe paper for Spanish class, and Nick and I racing home from school to see who would win a seat on the bench at the “good piano” in the living room instead of the ancient one in the den! I adored our dog Fiddlestix (a long-lived, sassy terrier mix who was resident at both 220 and 111), my dear friend Lisa’s Basset hound, Sock, and my friend Meg’s Poodle, Ouija. In May of 1987 I walked out the front door of 111 N. Lexington to attend my father’s funeral and I walked out of the same door only seven months later to head to McAllister to become Andrew’s wife.

In his recent sermons, Pastor Jim has spoken of his nostalgia for when his now teenage sons were little boys. I watched many of you wistfully nod your heads in agreement and comprehension when he spoke of evening bath time routines and the peaceful joy of reading bedtime stories with little ones snuggled safely in bed—with no thought of the “years to come”—simply and absolutely content to live in the present. I am very much content to live in the present, but like Jim, I occasionally allow myself a little nostalgia. Whether it was all exactly as we remember it, or whether we’ve embellished and gilded the past, warm and happy memories are a true gift and a welcome respite from present worries and strife. Thank you for allowing me to share some of my memories. And may I recommend that you take a little time to indulge yourself this summer. Spend some time with your best memories. You know they’re in there somewhere—just waiting for you to visit—waiting to come alive. Take good care.

Beth







## Musical Minute:

For as long as I can remember, I've loved birds. One of my earliest memories is sitting next to my Grandfather Leitch on the edge of his bed watching birds at a feeder attached to the sill outside the window of his downstairs bedroom. His health was failing, and his bed had been moved to the dining room so that he could be amid family. I remember him smiling as we watched the cardinals and other birds dart back and forth to the feeder, vying for position. I'm not a fanatical bird watcher, but I know my way around a Peterson Field Guide, and I've been known to note in our bird guide the date of the first sighting of some of our favorite spring visitors.

The months of June and July bring an abundance of new bird life to our place out Potts Creek. As the days begin to lengthen in early spring the male songbirds, sporting colorful seasonal finery and singing their most elaborate arias from the tops of the trees and the rooftop, get busy attracting mates. Soon our birdhouses, shrubs, trees, and any bit of vacant real estate under the eaves of the house, the front porch, and deck are inhabited by all manner of feathered neighbors.

Each spring a Carolina Wren claims our house as his territory, singing from all corners of the roof, front and back, beginning somewhere between 4:30 and 5:00 every morning. How can something so diminutive and delicate make such a racket? We especially appreciate our spunky little wrens as they are year-round residents, displaying bold tenacity and fortitude on even the iciest, most frigid winter days. This year we've had multiple families of House Finches in the decorative dentils under the gutters, each raising several broods so far. Although not native to our state, the house finch is a beautiful bird with a melodious song. The Eastern Phoebes are lovely, subtly colored birds who leave a twiggy, muddy mess on the floor and behind the lanterns on the front porch. Insect eaters, the Phoebes are tolerant of their human neighbors and don't mind nesting right above or beside the front door. We've been blessed each year to have a couple of our houses inhabited by Eastern Bluebirds. They're insect eaters and when they drop from a limb to pursue a meal, it looks as though a piece of the heavens has dropped to the ground. The spirited Brown Thrashers are always welcome springtime visitors, nesting in a dense rose bush and vigorously tossing

mulch and leaves around while scavenging for insects. While the Brown Headed Cowbird is not especially welcome (They are a "parasitic" species which leaves their lone egg in someone else's nest to be raised by the unassuming host parents.), they do have a charming warbling song like a babbling brook. And I could go on for days about my beloved American Crows. They're intelligent, inquisitive, wary, and vocal (okay—squawky). And I adore them.

These days, our electronic devices and tablets can get in the way of our interactions with nature (not to mention our interactions with family and friends), but a couple of years ago I discovered a wonderful app for my smartphone that actually enhances and broadens my birdwatching experience. The Merlin Bird ID from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology is a great app for beginning and experienced birders alike and there is a great feature called "Sound ID." All you have to do is walk out on your porch or stick your phone out the window of your home or car and push a button on your smartphone screen. The app immediately begins to record and identify any birds in the area. One evening in mid-May I was delighted to learn that my chatty avian friends included not only the usual suspects —the Eastern Bluebird, Carolina Wren, and Red-bellied Woodpecker, but also the Scarlet Tanager and Red-eyed Vireo (both here only during breeding season according to my guide).

It's fascinating and miraculous to witness how nature provides for everything in its season—blossoms for the returning Hummingbirds, little green worms hanging from the trees for the newly-hatched Bluebirds, all manner of bugs, grubs, grasshoppers, and spiders, and yes, even songbird eggs and tiny hatchlings for the reawakened snakes in the vicinity. Perhaps Psalm 147 (verses 7-9) sums it up best:

"Sing unto the Lord with thanksgiving; sing praise upon the harp unto our God who covereth the heaven with clouds, who prepareth rain for the earth, who maketh grass to grow upon the mountains. He giveth to the beast his food, and to the young ravens which cry."

Have a great start to summer!

Beth

August 2022

McAllister Messenger



## Musical Minute:

With the high humidity and furnace-like heat of recent weeks, I've had cool water on my mind. More precisely, while lugging around the watering can to water our flower pots, I've found myself humming the tune to "Cool Water." It's not a song that I know particularly well, but I do remember the end of the refrain, "Cool, clear water." Written in the 1930s and featured in several western films over the decades, it's a song about a man and his horse (or was it a mule?) and their fruitless search for water as they make their way through the arid desert.

Thankfully I've never wandered alone through the desert, thirsty or otherwise, with just my horse for company, but I have experienced the miracle of cool, clear water. When Nick and I were young, mom and dad rented a camp on the Jackson River from the Parker family. There we whiled away the summer months in a weathered, gray, two-story cabin right on the banks of the Jackson. The rustic cabin had electricity, but there was no water indoors. Still, we had the next best thing, perhaps even the very best thing—just outside the back door of the camp. Near the door was a majestic chestnut tree, and miraculously, at least it appeared miraculous to me, from beneath the hollowed trunk of this towering tree, an underground spring flowed up. Its water was as cold as ice and if you drank it too quickly directly from the pipe that ran from below the tree, you'd get a sudden, sharp headache. Years before we inhabited the camp, someone had built a short, low bridge of rock and cement block that spanned the spring. Mom and dad kept an old enamelware dipper near the spring, and we could stand on that little bridge and scoop as many dippers as we could ever possibly drink. Over the years, the spring had cut its own path to the river and after crossing under the bridge, it gurgled toward the river, sustaining a tasty and vibrant green patch of watercress along the way. The faucet ran endlessly with bracingly cold, perfectly clear water and we could hear its comforting constancy at night through the open window of our upstairs bedrooms.

When we swam in the river, which we did pretty much from dawn to dusk when the weather allowed, the water from the spring outlet was so frigid, we'd get foot cramps if we swam too close to the riverbank as we passed. There was a small refrigerator in the camp,

but anything that needed swift or prolonged chilling (canned beverages, whole watermelon, etc.) went directly from the old Jeep into the spring, completely bypassing the cabin. Nick and I remember the camp years as a magical time, although we now realize that the whole endeavor took significant effort on mom and dad's part. Any time we needed hot water, say, for washing dishes, we'd help mom haul it in so she could heat it in a huge old kettle on the electric coil cooktop. She would do the dishes in two wash basins in the dry sink. I remember dad shaving at the spring in the mornings before he'd go to work at Westvaco, mirror in hand and his big, chilly "Brrrrrrrr!" waking us up from our summer dreams.

Andy and I had the opportunity to kayak the Jackson with friends several summers ago and we put in a couple of miles north of where the camp once stood. I knew that the cabin was long gone, but as we approached its former site, I recognized some familiar landmarks on the opposite side of the river and looked across to see if anything tangible remained of the place that had brought us such joy. It was high summer, so everything was overgrown, and I couldn't see even a tiny remnant to tell that the camp had ever been there. The cabin had boasted a beautiful rock chimney that ran one whole side of the two-story structure, so it was remarkable, and admittedly, a bit sad, to see that absolutely nothing remained. But I'm guessing that the spring, "our" spring, is still there, flowing from its mysterious origin, deep underground, making its way to the river and keeping the fish cool.

Whether you sit by the pool, the river, the lake, the creek, or even in the cool comfort of your home while watching a nature program on television, I hope that you find respite from the heat in the ripples of "cool, clear water" this summer. Just like childhood, summer will be over before we know it. Enjoy!

Beth



September 2022

McAllister Messenger



# Musical Minute:

Lately, our garden has been cranking out cucumbers, peppers, and zucchini by the bucket - full; certainly, enough for the two of us with some to spare. Thanks to the generosity of our fellow farmers at McAllister (We love you, Poagues!) and our garden plot, we've not needed to shop the produce section at the local stores for several weeks now. It's an easy time of year for meal-planning, heavy on the veggies and light on the meat, save for an occasional pork chop on the grill. Although they're a little time-consuming, my new favorite is zucchini pancakes. With a dollop of sour cream or a spoonful or two of fresh tomato salsa, they're the epitome of summer on a plate—fresh, savory, and satisfying. Every meal, whether a hot dog on a bun or something more creative, comes beautifully garnished with fresh herbs and maybe a few zingy-flavored nasturtium blooms. The frilly nasturtiums with their saturated hues elevate even the humblest meal to art. There is usually a blue Mason jar of zinnias -- such joyful flowers with their bright yellow crowns! — on the table, paired with pungent stems of herbs and whatever else is blooming in the cutting garden. Summer will be over before we know it, so we try to make the most of the season's tender offerings once the garden starts to come in.

When we lived in Austria, we were just outside of Graz, the country's second largest metropolis. Although only about twenty-five minutes north of the city, we were well and truly in the countryside, surrounded by small family farms. They were purposefully and precisely tended and farmed throughout the course of the year. Our summer neighbors included grazing cattle (a fascinating, smelly, source of entertainment for our Black Russian Terrier, Mila, who spent time just opposite the fence from our bovine friends), fields of corn, pumpkins, sunflowers, and grains. It was a peaceful and bucolic settlement, just perfect really, and living there gave me deep respect and appreciation for the challenging life of a farm family. "To every thing there is a season," took on real meaning for me during our years there as I observed our closest neighbors, the Thonhausers, fertilize, plow, sow, harvest, and repeat—year after year. Their livelihood and the security of their pantry for the winter months depended on their efforts. Our property line ended maybe 15 feet from our back step, and we learned from our landlords that our home had at one time been part of

the Thonhauser family farm. Their daughter and son-in law lived just below us on land that had been given to them on the occasion of their marriage. Beyond our back fence was a steep upward incline—a grassy hill where, in addition to a small upper field, the Thonhausers grew hay for animal feed. The hill was too pitched to be cut with machinery, and Andy and I marveled each fall as we watched Herr Thonhauser, a wiry, elderly man, cut the whole hillside with a huge scythe, his pace measured and the arc of the scythe sweeping and steady. One of the most memorable images of my whole lifetime is of Herr Thonhauser standing at the top of his hill, silhouetted by the setting sun, the scythe resting on his shoulder as he surveyed the day's work. How I've wished over the years that I could have painted that scene – to have captured the fading daylight and the absolute grace and dignity of that moment. But I don't paint. I'd love to tell you that after witnessing that scene, I composed something extraordinary on the piano, but I don't do that either. Instead, later that evening, I turned on the news to learn that pop star Michael Jackson had died. The headlines were, of course, exaggerated, as they often are when a celebrity passes, and I remember hearing something like, "The world has come to a grinding halt as fans throughout the globe learn of Jackson's death." No, I thought, Herr Thonhauser probably neither knows nor cares, but he did get his hillside cut today.

I enjoy my daily haul from the garden and marvel at the beauty and flavor of the fresh vegetables and flowers. The cherry tomatoes are so lovely and sweet. I confess, I even feel a little pride, but I realize that although it takes some work, it is nothing compared to the relentless toil of a real farmer. Just as in Austria, we in the Alleghany Highlands are surrounded by people who know the tireless labor it takes to raise livestock and crops. As the time of harvest comes to a crescendo in the coming weeks, I'll be thanking God "for the beauty of the earth" and saying a prayer for all the farmers who keep our larders stocked and our bodies nourished during even the coldest months. I'm all for celebrating Thanksgiving every day of the year!

Beth

November 2022

McAllister Messenger

# Musical Minute:



I love living in Virginia where we get to fully experience all four seasons of the year. I appreciate the quietude and chill of winter, the unabashed exuberance of spring, and the overgrown bounty of our hot summers (if not the biting insects and humidity that accompany it). Still, in my opinion, nothing beats fall. It brings the promise of cooler days to come, fewer hours of daylight, and more time for cozy indoor gatherings. It also brings pumpkins and mums, the very essence of autumn, on front porches and spilling down walkways. You can see why spiders and their webs are such a symbol of our halloween celebrations when you see hundreds of silvery, iridescent webs shimmering in the shrubs and grass on a brisk fall morning. There's not much better than stepping outdoors early in the day in October or November, feeling the subsiding chill of the night before as the brilliant sun shines through the ruby and golden hued leaves and the squirrels and birds awaken to begin their daily activities.

Thanks to the foraging habits of our friends in Europe, the cooler nights and bracing morning temperatures of autumn also became symbolic to me of mushroom season. The first fall after our arrival in the Czech Republic I, along with two other American friends, was invited to "go mushrooming" with a lovely older couple. We didn't know them particularly well and our Czech language skills certainly weren't highly developed at that point, but the invitation was heartfelt, and they assured us through the help of a translator that they would keep their eyes on us in the Czech wilds and that no harm would come to us. We were advised to dress warmly, wear comfortable shoes, and bring our appetites.

We met just after sunrise at their little cabin/garden plot on the outskirts of town and headed into the woods, each of us carrying a woven basket and a paring knife. Maria and Jiří, our new Czech acquaintances, quickly spotted an example of what we were looking for and showed it to us, noting the color, texture, and the fact that it was smooth on the underside and didn't have gills or "curtains." They impressed upon us how important it was to carefully harvest the mushroom so that it would regrow, and then they stressed yet again the importance of those gills. From the top the two mushrooms looked identical, but the presence of the gills on the bottom of the second meant the mushroom was poisonous.

Well, that made the stakes a little higher . . . And it made us all want to improve our language skills sooner rather than later. Was it the ones with the “curtains” or without that were poisonous?!

Not long after we entered the woods, Maria and Jiří displayed their prowess in the search for the elusive fungus (honed through decades of experience, no doubt), quickly filling their baskets with meaty, wild mushrooms. I, meanwhile, continued to scan the ground, finding nothing. As I tried to adjust my vision from the macro to the micro though, I began to notice a whole other world beneath the trees. The forest floor wasn't just scattered with pine needles and leaf debris. There were lush areas covered with verdant moss with tiny star-shaped flowers springing from the spongy ground. There were miniscule pockets of water melted from the overnight frost held in dried leaves and in pock-marked stones, waiting for the sluggish insects to awaken in the warmth of the sun and come have a drink. It was a hidden fairy world unlocked within a magical and foreign forest and as happens with such adventures, we became immersed in the experience, unaware of the passage of time. The sun climbed higher in the sky and at some point, I felt more than a twinge of hunger. What had seemed like just a few minutes search had been more than two hours spent foraging.

We novices had managed to find a few of the brown forest treasures and Maria and Jiří had filled their baskets and then some, moving on to large paper bags. It was time to enjoy the fungal fruits of our labors, so after our meditative and enchanting morning in the woods, we returned in high spirits to the warmth of the cabin where Jiří and Maria prepared a feast of wild mushrooms sauteed in butter and scrambled eggs all washed down with mugs of warm grog. It was one of the best, most satisfying meals I've ever had. There were other trips with other friends to different woods during our years away, each experience unique and magical in its own way. By the second year or so in the Czech Republic I even learned to say, “Jedeme na houby!” or “We're going mushrooming!” But I have always remembered the first trip as being especially empowering, perhaps due to the fact that it felt a bit risky. We hadn't been in the country long, but we trusted two people we barely knew (and with whom we could barely communicate) to take us “into the woods” to harvest a potentially poisonous wild fungus. And we experienced a once in a lifetime adventure and were shown exceeding kindness for which I am grateful to this day. Have a blessed Thanksgiving holiday!



Beth



## Musical Minute:



My mother was a bodacious maker of bows, a skill she attributed to having worked for a local florist when she was a newlywed. Whether adorning packages, wreaths, swags or garlands, mom's bows were always generously full, long-tailed, and perfectly symmetrical with elegant cinched loops. Sadly, I didn't inherit her talent for bow making, although it's not for lack of trying. Over the years I have studied her bows and attempted to fashion something equally beautiful, but never with much success. My bows always look sort of "scrinchy" and stingy by comparison, like they've already spent a decade or so in the wind and rain on a tired wreath. But my mama was a true artist when handed a spool of ribbon and we are blessed to still have a few of her creations hidden amongst our Christmas decorations.

We had a tree behind our home in Austria that hosted an abundance of mistletoe each winter and it became tradition to harvest a basketful to decorate for the holidays. It was so fresh that the greenery remained bright and the white berries plump throughout the whole season. Usually, the harvest required Andy on a ladder, but one Christmas there was about a foot and a half of snow on the ground and a particularly bountiful supply of mistletoe high in the tree. By clambering up the snow-covered hillside behind the tree, mom was able to reach the mistletoe and cut a huge cluster about the diameter of an extra-large pizza! She made a lovely bow out of green, gold, and red striped ribbon to decorate it and we hung it from the base of one of the light fixtures in the dining room. From that time, the striped bow became the official "bow of the mistletoe."

Our last Christmas in Austria was 2009. Mom stayed home that year to celebrate with Nick and Cathy. As I packed up our Christmas decorations following the holidays, I had no inkling that it would be the final time we would celebrate Christmas in Europe and that I wouldn't see my beloved Christmas ornaments for another three years. I was on a plane home to Covington by early May of 2010 after learning of mom's cancer diagnosis. Andy remained in Europe through November and although our household goods were packed up in late

October, they had to make the long voyage across the Atlantic on a cargo ship and then be cleared through customs. Our furniture, books, and other belongings, including the Christmas decorations, didn't make it home until mid-December. There was no time to unpack everything and search for the decorations before Christmas, so we celebrated with a small pre-decorated tree. It was an odd year anyway considering the circumstances, and the little tree suited our purpose just fine.

We were finally reacquainted with our Christmas decorations in December of 2012, about a year and a half after losing mom and three years after packing them away. (We had an extensive project at the house in December 2011 that necessitated me and our big dog vacating the house each day for a number of weeks. That little pre-lit tree from the previous year came in handy!) It was a joy to finally unbox the linens, ceramics, and ornaments and to discover that, remarkably, even the most fragile baubles had survived the long journey home to Virginia. Each of our Christmas decorations, like yours, I am certain, have a story to tell—the ornaments that hung on the magical trees of our childhood, the special ones that were given over the years by family and dear friends, the unexpected “perfect” ornament found on a trip to the beach . . . Unpacking was like visiting with old friends I hadn't seen in far too long. I wasn't prepared, however, for the flood of emotions and memories that hit me when I unearthed that striped ribbon, “the bow of the mistletoe,” scrunched in the corner of a box with some Christmas linens. There were some tears, of course, but they were quickly followed by smiles as I remembered mom purposefully scrambling up the snowy hillside, clippers in hand. The ribbon was a little worse for its time spent crushed in the box, but nothing that couldn't be refreshed with a little fluffing and maybe some steam. And it was as though mom had reached out her very talented hands and said, “Don't worry. I'm right here and I made this just for you. Merry Christmas!” I pulled out the “bow of the mistletoe” while writing this, just to take a look, and after at least fifteen years, I'll admit that it is looking a little tired. Maybe it's mom's way of saying, “Don't worry. I'm right here. Why don't you try your hand at making a new bow?”

I wish you warm and wonderful new holiday memories (exuberantly bedecked with ribbons and bows) to go along with the old. Merry Christmas!

Beth



## Dear members and friends of McAllister Memorial Presbyterian Church

As another year draws to an end, I hope that you and your loved ones return ever closer to a sense of normalcy after the disquietude of the pandemic years. In 2022 McAllister Memorial Presbyterian Church, like most churches, schools, and businesses across the U.S., resumed, for the most part, its usual calendar, if not yet all of our communal rituals. I think we felt a sense of relief and renewed stability at being back in the lull of our comfortable rhythms. Throughout the year, McAllister continued to stay in touch with its congregants and friends through the McAllister Messenger. I humbly thank you for choosing to spend a few minutes of your time with my contributions to the newsletter.

Henry Ward Beecher, famed 19th century preacher and younger brother of noted abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, once remarked, “Every man should be born again on the first of January. Start with a fresh page.” Very few start a new year without at least one wish for some tiny change, opportunity, or adventure. We all have unique dreams and hope for particular outcomes. I hope that January 2023 finds you feeling renewed and rekindled, if not reborn. We all share the same blank page—a book just waiting to be filled with all there is to learn and experience. I hope that you find the spark and stamina to write your very own “fresh page” each day in the new year!

Beth

Elizabeth Leitch Dreszer  
Organist and Choir Director