

The Ascent

ADVENT 2022

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Advent & Christmas at Ascension

The Hospitality Challenge



By Jonathan Millard, Rector

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Be hospitable to one another... (1 Peter 4:9)

One of the stories I hear time and time again from newcomers is how they have experienced a warm welcome and friendly conversation at Ascension. This is surely a good thing. To everyone who has greeted someone they don't know on a Sunday morning: "Well Done!" I wonder, how might we build on this strong foundation?

In our November mini sermon series, *Practicing Hospitality*, we sought to dig into the theme of hospitality found in the Scriptures. I hope you found the sermons suitably engaging, inspiring, and challenging. Andrea and I have certainly enjoyed being able to practice hospitality once again, after the many months of pandemic limitations.

In case you missed it, the challenge I shared with the congregation at the beginning of November was:

Every household practicing hospitality – inviting two or more people, five times, over the next fourteen months, for a meal, a cup of coffee, a walk, or a shared activity.

I appreciate that some people may find this challenge, well... challenging! Nevertheless, I am eager to hear the (hopefully) joyous stories, as people intentionally create opportunities to show hospitality to others. Part of the impetus for this challenge is the upheaval and limitations imposed on us due to the major building project now underway at Ascension. If we cannot so effectively practice hospitality at church let's practice it in our homes, dorms, apartments, and wherever we live.

Hospitality comes in many shapes and sizes. It includes noticing someone, having time to listen to someone, learning someone's name, and helping or serving someone. And, of course, hospitality can be expressed when you invite someone to join you in your home, or some other place, for a meal, a cup of coffee, or to spend time together.

If you have not already done so, I invite you to ask God to put on your heart a few people in our Church family whom you might extend an invitation to spend time with you. Rather than trying to organize this with some grand coordinated sign-up scheme, we want it to happen organically – you invite whomever you choose. It's good to get together with friends, but I encourage you to include at least one or two people that you don't know very well as you practice hospitality.

If each household (that could be a single person, a couple, a family, or a group of housemates) takes up this challenge, then many hundreds of people will have given and received hospitality by the end of next year. That would be a game changer in our common life, and a powerful witness to the biblical mandate to "practice hospitality" (Romans 12:13).

I would love to hear how you get on with this challenge – please do let me know.

Yours in Christ,

Jonathan N. Millard
(Rector)

Advent and Christmas Schedule

Service of Lessons and Carols: Sunday, December 18

There are many different stories that are told in the days and weeks leading up to Christmas, and a Service of Lessons and Carols is a unique way of enjoying one of these stories. The biblical narrative of fall and redemption is told through a series of scripture readings, reflections, and a variety of music. This year, the Service of Lessons and Carols will take place at both the 9:00 am and 11:00 am services on Sunday, December 18. It will be the same service at both times, featuring familiar carols as well as music from the choir, children's choir, and music team. In addition to being an opportunity to worship together, this is a particularly good service to invite people to - friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers. We hope you come and bring someone along with you!

Christmas Eve Family Service at 6:00 pm

All are invited to this warm service that is designed with children in mind. We will celebrate the nativity of Jesus with a children's tableau and sing the great carols of Christmas. Childcare for children aged 3 and under will be provided. Children aged 4 and older are with us for the service. Please remember to bring your bells to this service. It is a joy to sing the great hymns of Christmas with congregational bells ringing out!

Christmas Eve Festival Eucharist at 10:00 pm

Our late Christmas Eve service will feature a Festival Procession, incense, candles, and the great music of the season in celebration of the birth of the Christ child. Childcare is not provided. Please remember to bring bells.

Christmas Day Service of Holy Eucharist at 10:00 am

The lessons are different from Christmas Eve so that those who wish to make this their second service of Christmas may join those who prefer this quiet one to the festival celebrations on Christmas Eve. Childcare is not provided.



Spiritual Practices for Advent



By Andrea Millard, Director of Prayer Ministry & Leadership Development
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“The Advent season is a season of waiting, but our whole life is an Advent season, that is, a season of waiting for the last Advent, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth.”
-Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is In the Manger*

The beginning of the new liturgical year can be a great time for renewed engagement with spiritual practices. Here are three you might consider this Advent:

1 Advent Soul Care

Saturday, December 3 from 9:30 – 11:00 am in the Hunt Rooms

Soul Care features a morning of quiet prayer, gentle reflection, scripture meditation, and holy listening. Our guest this month will be Jeanne Kohn who will lead our Advent theme of waiting. Register using the News & Events link on the website.



2 Engage With an Advent Devotional

There are so many good choices when it comes to Advent devotionals! Finding one that you might actually use is where it can get challenging. Here are a few suggestions:

1. A newly released and beautiful book by artist and writer, Bette Dickinson, *Making Room in Advent*, focuses on the Advent story as it unfolds in Luke's gospel. With each of her twenty-five devotions, the author invites the reader to engage in spiritual practices of meditation, reflection, breath prayer, and contemplation using her original artwork that captures vignettes leading to Christ's coming.
2. For an interactive family and children's devotional, our Director of Children's Ministry, Catherine Slocum, recommends *Good Dirt: Advent, Christmas & Epiphany* by Lacy Finn Borgo & Ben Barczy. This book combines kid-friendly seasonal activities, daily devotionals, and Bible readings.
3. For a multi-sensory devotional that features art, music, and reflection, check out Biola University's Center for Christianity, Culture and the Arts online devotional. When you sign-up, they send you a daily email. See ccca.biola.edu/advent/
4. For a lectionary-based devotional, check out the one produced by Trinity School for Ministry featuring reflections written by students, faculty, staff, and alumni. It's available both in print and online. See www.tsm.edu





3 Service Project: Beautify the Nave

Saturday, December 17 from 9:00 – 11:00 am in the Nave

This festive morning is traditionally called The Greening of the Nave. This simply means we'll be decorating the church for Christmas. Our friendly Sacristy Team Leaders welcome you to join in the fun. We have various projects to work on – from stringing lights on mini-Christmas trees to decorating niches to climbing ladders to hang wreaths, and so much more! This is a wonderful way to meet warm and welcoming people, while exercising your gifts of service. Snacks provided. For more information and/or to let us know you'll join us, contact Melita Carter at cartermo@gmail.com.

Sunset: Songs for the Evening



By Elise Massa, Assistant Director of Music and Worship Arts

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Join us on *Saturday, December 10 from 6:00 pm - 7:30 pm* for a concert with Elise Massa, featuring songs from her newly released album, *Sunset: Songs for the Evening*. These songs are based on Daily Evening Prayer as found in *The Book of Common Prayer*. They are songs of rest for the weary, the worker, and the workaholic, songs of laying down the work of our hands and heart before a gracious Father who longs to restore us.

Advent is a season of slowing, waiting, and trusting in the Lord's providence. While we know that these postures are good for our soul, we also recognize that they are extremely difficult in a culture (and even church community) where rushing is the norm and rest is a luxury. During the concert, Elise will share the stories behind each song and her own struggles with workaholicism, and the grace that the Lord has shown to her through the practices of Sabbath and observing the natural world around her.



Changing Seasons:

How the Sacristy Team Enriched My Understanding of the Liturgical Seasons



By Susan B. Bailey

Looking out of my library window, the fall leaves are coming into full color - yellows, burnt oranges, and reds bursting into flames of beauty. Each season reminds us that God paints His world for our enjoyment. And each year we're reminded anew of the cycle of life.

But what about the church? We too experience the liturgical colors and seasons of the church calendar anew each year. As we head into the season of Advent, the color of the church hangings changes from green to purple—a reminder of the change of seasons in our communal life.

Who is responsible for these “behind-the-scenes changes?” Your Sacristy Team members! When I joined the team, I had little awareness of these rhythms of our Anglican church. But having worked with this team for the last six years I have a new appreciation and love for this ministry—it’s been like learning steps in a sacred dance.

Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas Day, uses purple symbolizing penitence, sorrow and royalty. Purple is also the liturgical color used for most of Lent which extends from Ash Wednesday to Easter Eve. Lent includes 40 days, excluding Sundays which are often called little Easters. Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter use white to symbolize purity, joy and new birth. In addition to the seasonal uses, white is the liturgical color for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Black indicates mourning, as on Good Friday. The liturgical color for Pentecost is red which symbolizes the Holy Spirit and martyrdom. In addition to its seasonal uses, red is the liturgical color for the days of martyred saints, ordinations, and confirmations. Green is the liturgical color during the season after Epiphany and Pentecost and symbolizes spring, life, and growth in the Holy Spirit.

There are a few other nuances, but this covers most of the color changes. It’s a lot to take in! Your Sacristy Team leaders and members feel immensely blessed to serve our priests and you in this manner. We are delighted to experience these liturgical seasons - these rhythms of life - every time we serve.

If you’d like more information about serving with the Sacristy Team, send an email to andrea.millard@ascensionpittsburgh.org.



Training Our Attention:

This Advent, Press the Reset Button by Reading Poetry



By Father Kevin Antlitz, Assistant Rector

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What would you say is the greatest threat to the vitality of our spiritual lives? What would you say is the most important aspect for a flourishing faith? My answer to both questions has to do with attention. I am convinced that one of our gravest contemporary problems – or perhaps the foundation upon which all other problems is built – is a lack of attention. Consequently, attending to our attention is one of the wisest things we can do as Christians to live and love more like Jesus.

How are we to understand attention?

Attention is a bit like concentration. As the French priest and philosopher, A.G. Sertillanges, describes it, attention is the convergence of our focus on a particular point. It consists of being here now, where an individual is attending to a particular thing at a particular place and at a particular time.

Attention is a faculty. Like other faculties, its power of engagement can be strengthened through habitual practice. Like our muscles, the more you use them, the stronger they grow, the more they can lift.

Attention is also a finite resource. We cannot pay attention to everything and what we pay attention to matters immensely. Where we train our focus can either pay great dividends or can bankrupt our souls because what we attend to shapes us. As New Testament scholar Gregory Beale has said, “We become what we behold.” When we pay attention to noise and distraction, we become frenetic, anxious, and angry.

The fact is, we live in the Age of Distraction. Our eyes and ears, indeed our very souls, are pulled this way and that by smartphone notifications, the never-ending news cycle, and Netflix. Over the years, one of the best practices I’ve found to help me reset and retrain my faculty of attention is by reading poetry during Advent. Let me explain why.

As Anglicans, the Church calendar gives shape and structure to our individual lives and our life together. The season of Advent is the start of a new church or liturgical year and, as such, it offers us the opportunity to inventory the past year and look ahead to the next. Advent functions as a kind of annual reset button. As Advent begins each year, we are reminded that Christ came, that Christ will come again, and that Christ comes to us even now by His Holy Spirit. Advent trains our attention. The convergence of our focus on Christ coming in the fullness of time can transform, little by little, how we live and love.

Where does poetry fit in?

The practice of poetry dovetails beautifully with this annual rhythm of resetting every Advent. Reading (or even writing) poetry helps to train and strengthen our faculty of attention. The practice of poetry helps us to be here now. You can’t read poetry while distracted.

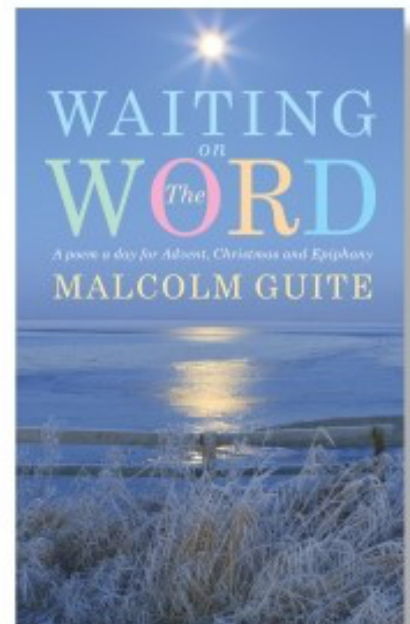
This is because poetry rails against all the habits of mind in our Age of Distraction. Poetry is a practice of resistance. It resists skimming. It resists speedreading. It resists mindlessness. It requires us to slow down, to pause, to chew, to think, to focus, to imagine, to contemplate. In these ways, the practice of reading poetry helps us to resist the pull of the newsfeed, the soundbite, and the TikTok video vortex. It is a kind of antidote to The Algorithm that is engineered to keep our attention.

The late, great American poet Mary Oliver has said, “Attention is the beginning of devotion.” Poetry trains our faculty of attention. It helps us devote ourselves. This devotion, this attention is transferrable. Learning to pay attention to a poem, helps you learn to pay attention to God in prayer and in the world. Learning to pay attention to God helps you learn to pay attention to your friend who is talking to you (or would if only you would pay attention).

Read along with us

If you’re like me and find yourself in need of some training to strengthen your capacity to say “no” to the many – the noise, the distractions – so that you can say “yes” to the one thing that is necessary, I invite you to join me in reading *Waiting on the Word* by the Anglican priest and poet, Malcolm Guite. This poetry anthology includes a poem a day for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Each poem is also accompanied by insightful commentary.

For the past seven Advents, Susan and I have made a practice of reading these poems aloud together and discussing them. We invite you to read along with us. If you decide to join us, do please let me know. I’d love to hear about your favorite poems and how reading a poem a day enriches your experience of Advent and strengthens your attention.





Church of the Ascension Youth Group: A CAYG Christmas



By Alex Banfield Hicks, Director of Youth and College Ministry
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Christmas Wreaths!

Save money and support our youth! Back again by popular demand, you can come to church on Sunday December 11th and return home surrounded by the smell of fresh pine. Furnish your home with wreaths, pine roping, and a basket of Christmas greens! Order forms will be available on a Sunday morning, or you can order online via our QR code. Payment by Easy Tithe, cash or check!



Christmas Comes Home

Shining faces, laughter, great food, Christmas games and music. While these things are nice in a church basement, perhaps they are even better in a warm and inviting home, decorated for the festive season. So instead of the 'Christmas Overnight' that we have done in the past, we will be enjoying separate CAYG Christmas parties on Friday December 16 (for middle schoolers) and Sunday December 18 (for high schoolers). Stay tuned for more details nearer the time.



Christmas Wreaths Delivered on Sunday, December 11

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made



By James Scannell

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For this issue James, a young adult at Ascension who has non-speaking autism and communicates via a spelling board, is interviewing another young adult – Hannah Zimmerman. Hannah participates in our disability ministry and she regularly attends Bellefield Presbyterian Church with her parents.

“God’s time is slow, patient, and kind, and welcomes friendship; it is a way of being in the fullness of time that is not determined by productivity, success, or linear movements toward personal goals. It is a way of love, a way of the heart.” —John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time*

This year, I had the privilege of meeting John Swinton, a Scottish theologian. He says that God moves at the pace of presence and slowness. This is hard in our culture. People with disabilities can help us all learn how to slow down and be quiet and present with one another. Here is my recent interview with Hannah Zimmerman. She is a member of the disability community at Ascension. I hope you enjoy getting to know her here and in person!

J: How did you come to Ascension?

H: I’ve been here a long time, with Christina [Carlucci] at Capernaum club. I like it here with Beth and my group.

J: What else do you enjoy?

H: I like Christian music, K-LOVE radio. Activities and hanging out. I love games!

J: Which ones?

P: Parcheesi!

J: I’m wondering how you spend your days.

H: I do boring chores in my house and have meals with my family.

J: Anything else?

H: I went to Duquesne for a work program. I worked at the Marriott, CCO, and Magee Hospital.

J: What did you like best?

H: I liked Magee best. I did office work. I also rolled silverware bundles.

J: You have so many skills. How do you want to use them in the future?

H: By working with people. I especially like babysitting and helping little kids.

J: Are you hoping for other work?

H: Yes. I had several interviews. I have a job coach. She is helping me find work.

J: I am wondering how you experience God.

H: I love Jesus. He makes good things for everybody. He died for us.

(At this point I got up and walked around to take a break – as I often do. Hannah said, “We’re not done yet!”)

J: Does He talk to you?



H: Yes. I do hear Jesus.

J: In a particular time or place?

H: During the day. Especially during breakfast time and at WINGS.

J: How do you think the church can better serve people with disabilities?

H: That’s a hard question. Everyone in the church should serve each other.

J: I think the church forgets that people with disabilities have so much to offer.

H: Yeah.

J: I know that people with disabilities are not always seen. I hope you feel seen. I think we bring authenticity in our relationships that typical people don’t sometimes. We are just who we are – no games. I like you so much. I think you have so much to give. Your heart is so beautiful.

H: Thank you!

An Advent Reflection



By James Scannell

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I love ordinary time. A time of growth, a time of freedom. It can be hard to move into Advent. Days are dark; lament is in the air. And yet, I believe the LORD calls us to seasons of lament. There can be too much simplistic praise in the American church, pushing us all to deny the darkness in our world. I believe that God desires us to repent of our complacency in the face of evil and oppression and lies. Let us spend a few weeks in sobriety before we celebrate the coming of our King.

How can we do this, when our culture rushes into the Christmas season as early as October? Stay still. Invite the Holy Spirit to speak. He is longing to hear from you and to speak into your life. He may tell you to stop what you are doing and be silent. He may tell you to stop buying things and give to the poor. He may tell you to stop baking and sit with a lonely person. Just stop and hear His call. Amen.



Women's Book Club



By Marilyn Chislaghi, Director of Ministry

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Ginger Weeber (Senior Warden) and Marilyn Chislaghi (Director of Ministry) are launching an Ascension Women's Book Club. We will gather quarterly to discuss a good read, often with a liturgical link to the time of the year. Our first book will be *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ* by Fleming Rutledge. Rutledge contends that Advent begins in the dark and encompasses the whole of Christian experience. It is not a season to prepare for Christmas but to seriously prepare for the second coming of Christ and His final judgment. She writes, "...the Medieval church designed the four Sundays of Advent around the themes of the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell—in that order, so that the subject of hell was preached on the Sunday just before Christmas Eve. That was no accident. The idea was - and is- to show how the light of the birth of Christ appeared against a backdrop of darkness, depravity, and despair." (pg. 238).

If you'd like to join us, please purchase a copy of the book and dig in! We'll meet on **Friday, December 16 at 7:30 pm** at Marilyn's home in Squirrel Hill. Email her if you hope to come and she'll send you her address.

Rutledge's *Advent* is a long book, a compilation of essays and meditations, that many come back to each Advent, reading a few chapters more or re-reading selections that have been particularly meaningful. For our discussion, we suggest you focus on the following:

- Introduction (pp. 1-33)
- Something Evil This Way Comes (pp. 62-70)
- Advent Begins in the Dark (pp. 251-255)
- On Location with John the Baptist (pp. 275-280)
- The Bottom of the Night (pp. 314-321)
- Hell (pp. 359-364)

To prepare for our conversation, please be ready to share/answer the following:

- Pick 2-3 passages that resonate with you.
- What was new or surprising to you about the season of Advent? What questions do you have?
- How might you integrate something from this into your walk with Jesus?

Music & Worship Arts

Retelling the Story: Some thoughts on Lessons and Carols



By Chris Massa, Director of Music and Worship Arts

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If you haven't seen it recently, or if you've somehow never seen it, I'd like to recommend that you find a way to watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. It's kind of rough from a technical perspective, but there's a charm to its visual language that, for my money, most glossy computer animation has yet to equal.

But what's most remarkable about it isn't the animation or the terrific jazz soundtrack—a staple in our home this time of year. It's that, just when the story is coming to its high point, the jokes stop, the lights dim, and one of the kids recites a passage from the Bible: Luke 2:8-14, the angels' annunciation to the shepherds.

It's an incredible moment, and one that caused a fair amount of consternation among the show's creators. When the producers asked Charles Schulz, the writer and creator of Peanuts, if it was wise to put so much scripture at the center of a TV special, Schulz was adamant, replying, "If we don't do it, who will?" And the scripture passage stayed right where it was, presented without interruption or the slightest hint of irony or cynicism. And what's more, it is followed by a simple, profound bit of dialogue: "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

There are a lot of stories floating around about what the holiday season means, and while some of them are beautiful, functioning not unlike the best fables, they tend to fall short of expressing "what Christmas is all about." And stories matter. Stories shape who are, what we believe, and how we view the world. That's why the best and most important stories are repeated and retold, time and time again. To quote Daniel Taylor in *The Skeptical Believer: Telling Stories to Your Inner Atheist*, "No one believes anything important with the intellect alone.... Story is more effective than reason alone because story engages us as whole persons. Stories light up our minds, play across our emotions, and call us to action with our bodies. They may be read or heard in stillness, but good stories will not leave us alone until we change ourselves and the world."

One way that some Christian traditions have retold the



Christmas story is through a unique kind of worship gathering, a service of Lessons and Carols. The term "lessons" is a bit of a misnomer, as preaching and didactic teaching are kept to a minimum, if they are present at all. Rather, the service is based all around the Christmas story and the events and prophecies leading up to it, and it tells the story through scripture readings and "carols," some traditional, some new. The structure is different from most of our services with an altogether different liturgy, but I don't think that means it's bad, or that it's one of those curiosities that belongs at the edges of what we do as a faith community. Rather, it can serve as a potent and necessary reminder, that amid all the competing narratives, there is one story that really is what Christmas is all about.

Here are four invitations:

First, attend. Our yearly service of Lessons and Carols will be on Sunday, December 18, with the same service at both 9:00 am and 11:00 am. I hope to see many if not all of you there.

Second, invite friends. Thanks to its unique structure and reliance on familiar songs, Lessons and Carols is a great service to invite people to, especially if church isn't usually their thing.

Third, get involved. If you love singing but aren't sure about joining the choir on a regular basis, this is a great opportunity to dip your toes in and see how the water feels, to try a choir robe on for size. Rehearsals will be on Thursdays at 7:00 pm starting in November, and please talk to me if you're interested.

Fourth, remember and retell. The Christmas story is too good and beautiful not to be retold. More than that, it can and should form the very backbone of who we are and what we do. It's a story that richly deserves to be retold, time and time again, through the spoken word, music, art, creativity, and our lives. After all, if we don't do it, who will?



By Elise Massa, Assistant Director of Music and Worship Arts

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Last winter, Church of the Ascension partnered with United Adoration to host the St. Nicholas Night Market. This truly was a church and community event! Twenty artisans gathered on the big lawn, sheltered under tents to sell their wares in an outdoor market. Among the bustle of patrons, one could hear the bleating of sheep from the Christmas live nativity, as well as the cheering of children who trailed St. Nicholas as he whizzed by giving bicycle sleigh rides. Children and adults alike tried their luck at making pomander balls at the kids' craft table.

The driving force behind this event was love - we want to celebrate and empower our artists to have a place to bless their church family and neighbors through the work of their hands. We also wanted to shine as a beacon of Christ's hope and joy to our neighbors. It was a joy to provide a

safe, family-friendly evening laden with the love of Jesus through the beauty of art. The Lord was faithful! Many in attendance said they lived in the apartments surrounding the church. I spoke with a woman from Italy who commented that she was inspired by our church's desire to provide such an event for the community. As a Catholic, she longed for churches to be in the community, not just behind closed doors. She recognized that our joy was in Christ, and she asked for prayer that other churches would have the imagination in reaching the neighborhood.

I am excited to share that we will once again host the St. Nicholas Market this year. **The event is scheduled for Sunday, December 4 from 5:00 - 7:00 pm.** Logistics are still a bit hazy due to our construction, but we know that the Lord will provide the space we need. Please pray for this event! Also, any artists who would like to sell their work are welcome to contact Elise Massa to see if any artisan spaces are available.



Cookies Bring the Kingdom



By Catherine and Jay Slocum, Ascension Children's Ministry

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Why do we celebrate special events? And, what makes them special? A wedding. A 50th anniversary. Christmas. Upon reflection, we might be able to see that the special events of our lives are instances that capture the way things ought to be. The 50th anniversary is what we all aspire to. We dress up like royalty for a wedding not because we are kings and queens but because that is what we aspire to be. The wedding is “play-acting” what we want from life with another person. So, we act it out in extraordinary ways. The band, Dawes, captures this hope in their song, *A Little Bit of Everything*:

Somewhere a pretty girl is writing invitations,
To a wedding she has scheduled for the fall,
Her man says, 'Baby, can I make an observation?
You don't seem to be having any fun at all.'
She said, 'You just worry about your groomsmen and your shirt-size,
And rest assured that this is making me feel good,
I think that love is so much easier than you realize,
If you can give yourself to someone,
Then you should.
'Cause it's a little bit of everything,
The way you choke, the way you ache,
It is waking up before you,
So, I can watch you as you wake.
So, in the day in late September,
It's not some stupid little ring,
I'm giving a little bit of everything.

The Advent-Christmas season is a special event in the life of the Christian. It is how we want our year to start out. In Advent, we express our longing for things to come together into a fullness and a completeness because we cannot accept the world as it is: broken, fragmented and full of pain and hurt. So, we stage a special event in four acts (Advent 1, 2, 3, 4) consummated in Christmas day. And, like the toast at the 50th anniversary party, or the exchanging of rings at the wedding, there are artifacts and rituals that aid us in our quest to see the world as it ought to be, as we wish it were. An Advent Open House is such an event. In our too busy lives it says, “I long for friendship

and intimacy with my neighbors.” The Advent Wreath gathers us together when too many days we eat alone without anything special to bind us.

Likewise, in this season, the Ascension Kids Ministry

has adopted a practice that strives to show us how the world ought to be by conducting the **Advent Make and Give Cookie Baking Project**. For the second year in a row, families with young children have taken Advent cookie kits home, made them as a family, and then happily delivered them to members over 70 years of age at their homes. In doing so, much joy has been expressed in this act. Why? Well, it seems that this Advent act fulfills our longings. It draws the generations together. Children and their parents connect with grandparents and those who, in many cases, have raised their own children. The simple act of making cookies becomes artifact and ritual expressing the way we want the world to be – generations bound together in mutual love and giving rather than isolation.

Beginning on the first Sunday in Advent, November 27, Ascension's children's ministry will provide Advent Make and Give Cookie Baking Kits. Be sure to pick one up and participate in this delightful project!

“We participated in the Advent Make and Give cookie baking project and had a wonderful experience. I am far from a baker and can safely say that the cookies were super easy to bake. The kids and I had a blast making them and even more fun delivering them. Best of all, we got to know an Ascension family that we hadn't yet met. They were so kind that they drove over to our house and dropped off a couple of Christmas treats for the kids. We can't wait to do it again this year.” – Clay Brockman



Wrapping Up in Christmas Style!



By LuAnn Pengidore, Director of International Ministry
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"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." Hebrews 10:23

Fun in the Fall

November is always a rich time for international students in our program - some have been practicing English with us for over ten weeks and have begun to bond with their teachers and classmates. In fact, during the class break with snacks in the hall, you can hear the buzz as they are practicing English, sharing information and helping one another. On our two monthly field trips, such as pumpkin picking at Springhouse farm or the Ambridge Old Economy Village, students look forward to talking in English with Ascension members and other internationals.

Program Highlights

This year, there are approximately 225 students actively participating in the program in 14 classes and 3 Bible studies with 2 - 3 teachers in each class or study. These classes meet on Monday and Wednesday mornings and evenings as well as online. Two small classes that are new this year are a song class led by Lara McGill and a career workshop held monthly by Joan Anson. Our classes span preliteracy to advanced level with TED talks and literature discussions.

This semester, Bible studies are held after the Monday morning class or on Tuesday evenings. Discipleship is on-going between conversation partners and those meeting with staff one on one. For example, Timmy Podnar visits two Persian speaking students, Adila and Zuhail, weekly. We are thankful that many students were placed in homes for Thanksgiving meals.

Christmas Party

The inter-personal relationships that are developing culminate in our Christmas party on Saturday, December 17. This is the end of our 13-week semester, and we hope to wrap things up in Christmas style! This celebration allows students to introduce their spouses and children to others



in their classes. This year the party will be a progressive dinner brought by the students and arranged around the education wing with Latino, Middle Eastern, African, and Asian specialties and educationally decorated tables. The party is especially valuable for the 20 students who have been meeting online and are now able to meet and laugh in person. You are welcome to join the fun!

Besides a wonderful dinner, our Christmas gathering has featured a historic tour of the nave by Jonathan and Andrea - with its beautifully decorated tree. They explain the Christian aspects of both Advent and Christmas as the nave inspires plenty of questions by students. Gary Harger has taught and played hymns on the organ and students learn some meaningful traditional carols. Some students respond to our invitation to attend Lessons and Carols as well.

Please pray for our international ministry - the participants, the teachers and Bible study leaders. We hope to bless all who enter our doors and give them a wonderful experience of Christians and the church.

Have You Ever Been in a Posada?



By Daniel Behrens, Ascension Missionary in Residence

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Observing Las Posadas is a centuries-old Advent tradition, especially in Mexico. Posada is a Spanish word which translates to “inn” or “shelter”. For nine nights leading up to Christmas Eve, neighbors gather to reenact Joseph and Mary seeking shelter in Bethlehem, following a very catchy traditional song.

Our first Posada was unforgettable! Rebekah and I had just moved to South Texas and were invited to a Posada at a small, short to long-term shelter for asylum-seekers. The shelter was actually called *La Posada Providencia* and is a ministry of the Sisters of Divine Providence who also operate La Roche College in Pittsburgh.

Shelter clients played the major roles in the reenactment: “Mary” was a political asylum-seeker from Zimbabwe who suffered an attack which left her pregnant. “Joseph” was a quiet young man from the Congo who waded through the jungle separating South and Central America to help his nieces and nephews reach the United States. Children from Mexico, Guatemala and the Congo dressed up as angels, guiding the way.

At the first house, the ragtag Holy Family sings, following the traditional Posada song, “In the name of heaven, we ask you for shelter. My beloved wife can go no longer.” But they are rejected by the innkeepers, “Go away. I can’t open up. You might be a robber.” Joseph continues to plead for help, but the irritated innkeepers insist, “I don’t care who you are, let me sleep. I already told you we are not going to open.”

The innkeepers at the second house rudely dismiss Mary, “If she is a queen, why does she travel alone at night?”

But at the final building, the innkeepers sing “Enter, Holy Pilgrims! We did not recognize you.” After the slow, dark trudge from building to building, the joy and relief of this moment was palpable. Then the party began, complete with Christmas carols, tamales, and spiced hot chocolate.

The Posada tradition and the biblical Nativity story itself should provoke us. There is comfort for those who ask for shelter today that your Lord has gone before you! And there is a clear challenge to the innkeepers of today, those who enjoy enough stability to extend hospitality to others. Do we dare to recognize the face of our Lord in today’s pilgrims?

The pregnant young woman who played Mary is still waiting for a decision on her asylum case. Her hearings have been delayed countless times, which has prevented her from being reunited with her daughter in Zimbabwe. In a real way she is still outside, asking for shelter. But just a few months after the night of the Posada she gave birth to her son, and had the courageous faith to name him Emmanuel, “God with us.”

If the Lord is stirring your heart to get involved with refugee ministry through Ascension, I would love to talk with you! Please send me a message!



Advent Preparations for an Epiphany Adventure



By Nate Twichell

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The season of Advent is a season of waiting, and of patience. We think of the prophets who waited so long for the coming Messiah, yet steadfastly pointed the way to the coming Christ.

We think of Anna the Prophetess who, never leaving the temple, “spoke about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:38) And we are reminded of the patience required in the slow work of disciple making.

At the Parish Retreat in September, we were blessed to have Dean Ching Wah and his wife Siew Ling visit from Thailand. Dean Ching Wah and his family have been planting the seeds of faith in the hard soil of Thailand for more than 25 years, patiently waiting for those seeds to develop into Jesus followers, then into disciple makers, then into churches, and finally into a diocese. When asked at the retreat if the Anglican church in Thailand would ever grow into a diocese, Ching Wah answered confidently that it would, but not in his lifetime. They wait with patience and confidence.

In mid-January a team of seven from Ascension will make the long trip to northern Thailand. Led by Erika Twichell, the team consists of Mari and Davita Stout, Elizabeth Ames, Deacon Jess Bennett, and Kelly and Sophie Shane. Over the past six years, Ascension has slowly built a partnership with Saint Andrew’s Anglican Church in Chiang Mai. Saint Andrew’s started with a pre-school and kindergarten designed to reach out to the surrounding community by offering a world-class, English based curriculum. In a part of the world that is at least 95% Buddhist, most people have never even met a Christian, let alone had a meaningful relationship with one. The Anglican church in Thailand

is engaged in patient work! The Ascension team will be supporting that work by leading a week-long special program for the school, “Reading is Fun Week”, based around the children’s author Mo Willems. The team will have the opportunity to build relationships with both students and their parents, as the whole family will be invited to various events throughout the week.



This will also be an opportunity for the team to listen to and learn from the team at Saint Andrew’s. Each time we have gone to Chiang Mai, we have returned changed people. We have been challenged to pray for our brothers and sisters. We have been inspired to reach our neighbors in new ways. And we have been encouraged to be patient in persevering in the slow work of disciple making.

As we wait with expectation in this Advent season, we also wait with expectation for what God will do in us while in Chiang Mai. Will you pray for us? Will you pray for safe travel, open hearts, and healthy bodies? And will you pray for our Thai brothers and sisters as they patiently work to make the name of Jesus known in Chiang Mai?

Ascension's Ministry of Spiritual Direction



By Andrea Millard, Director of Prayer Ministry & Leadership Development
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Perhaps you've heard the term "Spiritual Direction" and wondered, "what's that all about?" Read on as we answer some questions you might have

about Ascension's Ministry of Spiritual Direction.

What is Spiritual Direction?

There are lots of ways to define Spiritual Direction. Sometimes Spiritual Direction happens in the context of a group setting (like Soul Care or the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises); sometimes it happens in one-on-one relationships. Ascension's Peer Supervision Group members describe it this way:

Spiritual Direction is a companioning relationship in which the goal is a growing intimacy between the Directee [that's the one receiving Spiritual Direction] and our Triune God.

Spiritual Directors help facilitate this relationship.

What is Ascension's Peer Supervision Group?

It's a group of trained Spiritual Directors who meet once monthly for two hours to support each other in their ministries and vocations as Spiritual Directors. Each is a member of Ascension (except for our friend, The Rev Mark Brown, who is an Anglican Priest in the Diocese of Pittsburgh) and is committed to providing listening care and prayer in the context of a Spiritual Direction relationship.

What Qualifications Do These Spiritual Directors Have?

Those participating in Ascension's Peer Supervision Group are Spiritual Directors who have completed training and are equipped with skills of discernment. Group members are clear that the role of the Spiritual Director is not to lead

or direct the Directee – we entrust that role to the Holy Spirit. Rather, we understand that the Spiritual Director's role is to facilitate a sacred space for discernment as we accompany the Directee toward a love response to the invitation of the Holy Spirit.

What Spiritual Practices Are Key for Our Spiritual Directors?

Spiritual Directors are serving best when silence and humility are honored as primary within the Spiritual Direction relationship. Silence allows the Directee to hear directly from the Holy Spirit, the True Director. Humility allows the Spiritual Director to maintain a posture of servitude before God to best offer help in the discernment process. Without silence and humility, there is a threat of this vulnerable relationship moving into a coercive relationship. This can happen when the Spiritual Director places him or herself in a seat of authority or fails to honor the sacred relationship between the Directee and God. Silence and humility help mitigate this risk. Ascension's Peer Supervision Group members uphold practices of silence and humility within their ministry.

Why Do Spiritual Directors Value Ascension's Peer Supervision Group?

Members of Ascension's Peer Supervision Group value the importance of accountability within the Christian community. These Spiritual Directors are recognized as "members in good standing" who participate regularly in the worship of the Church and function as lively members of the body of Christ. They commit to regular supervision (individual and/or peer) to maintain a level of self-awareness as Spiritual Directors. They commit to a humble pursuit of ongoing reading and training, and above all, they are committed to pursuing a character that is representative of a life of Christian discipline and seek ongoing personal formation as image bearers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Meet Ascension's Peer Supervision Group Members



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Two Invitations to Newcomers



By Jess Bennett, Deacon
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If you haven't yet attended our *Explore Ascension* class, here's your invitation! We will be holding our next class on *Saturday afternoon, December 3rd from 1:00 - 4:00 pm*. This one-time class is a part of our membership process at Ascension, although you certainly don't need to commit to becoming a member to benefit from participating! It's a great opportunity to get to know our clergy more personally, as well as make connections with other newcomers.

Throughout the class we discuss Anglican history and distinctives, who we are as a local church, as well as some of the "why" and "how" of our corporate worship practices including a "tour" through the Nave! All of this is incredibly helpful if you—like me!—have not come to us from an Anglican background and have questions. We provide coffee, snacks and childcare. If you are considering putting down "roots" at Church of the Ascension, we encourage you to come and get to know us a little better. Register on our website or reach out to me.

We also want to invite all who are new or still feel new, to a Christmas gathering especially for newcomers at the home of Jonathan and Andrea Millard. We'll gather on **Sunday, December 11 from 5:00 - 8:00 pm**. There is an RSVP on Ascension's website or let me know you hope to come. Please bring a plate of cookies or squares to share. While most of our events include kids, this party is for grownups. Hopefully the kiddos can curl up and watch a video, perhaps even Charlie Brown's Christmas, as Chris Massa recommends in his article!





Legacy Seniors Ministry

Elizabeth and Mary through Scripture, Poetry, and Music

Thursday, December 15
12:30 – 2:30PM
\$15/lunch (1st timers free)



Worship Services **Sunday 9:00 am, 11:00 am Nave Services** with [YouTube](#) live stream.

Website www.ascensionpittsburgh.org

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A Worshipping Community;
Equipping God's People; Sharing
Christ's Healing with a Broken World