

# The Ascent

**ADVENT 2023**

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# Advent at . Ascension

# Advent at Ascension



By Jonathan Millard, Rector

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**A**dvent (the four-week season leading up to Christmas) begins on Sunday, December 3rd, and marks the beginning of a new church year. Advent is a season of waiting, repentance, and hope. It is a season that stands in marked contrast to frenetic activity that so often marks the end of a calendar year. As Christians, we proclaim that Jesus is Lord and we set our hope on him. At the beginning of this upcoming new liturgical year, I invite you to the observance of a Holy Advent.

While the world around us is already bedecked with wall-to-wall Christmas colors and decorations, in Advent the Church uses purple - the traditional color used to reflect the Advent themes of sin and repentance. Advent is a penitential season. In it, we are invited to engage in spiritual “house cleaning” or “heart cleansing” in preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas, and for his coming again!

One beautiful part of Advent is that many of the daily readings focus on the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah, almost more than any other prophet, expresses depths of yearning alongside expectation and hope for deliverance. At the beginning of that great prophetic book, as Bishop Alex reminded us at the September Town Hall meeting, we see a vision of the Lord in his Temple - high and lifted up. It is a majestic image of God's sovereignty and power. His train alone fills the temple. Nothing is a surprise to God, and he is almighty, all-powerful, and he knows us, loves us, and is more concerned for our church and each person in it than we are ourselves.

Later, in Isaiah 40, we encounter these great words of comfort:

*“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make*

*straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

Advent is a season of waiting and longing, anticipation, and hope. It looks back to the first coming of Jesus in the incarnation and looks forward to the second coming of Jesus for the culmination of all things – when God's justice, mercy, and love will be seen for all peoples and all of creation.

We all experience many seasons of waiting: as a church family for the selection and coming of a new rector; as individuals for health news; for the arrival of a new child; for the results of an examination or college application. While we wait, let us intentionally draw near to God. I pray that the liturgical new year, which begins with the Advent promise of the Messiah, God with us, may encourage and inspire us as this year of 2023 draws to a close.

One of the ways we mark Advent in our services and in our homes is with the lighting of an Advent wreath. I encourage all households to purchase or make their own Advent wreath and light it each Sunday or perhaps each evening when you are gathered for a meal. Advent wreaths are a simple circle of four candles: three purple and one pink, with a white 'Christ Candle' in the middle. There are different understandings of the significance of the four candles which are lit on each new Sunday of Advent. One approach sees the candles as representing the Prophets, the Holy Family, the Shepherds, and the Magi. Another approach views the candles as standing for Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace.

At the beginning of each of our Sunday services in Advent we will hear the words "O Come, O Come Immanuel" when the candles are lit, adding a different verse each week.

*O Come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,  
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.*

*O Come, thou Branch of Jesse's tree, free them from Satan's tyranny  
that trust thy mighty power to save, and give them victory o'er the grave.*

*O come, though Dayspring from on high, and cheer us by thy drawing nigh;  
disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadow put to flight.*

*O come, Desire of nations, bind in one the hearts of all mankind;  
bid thou our sad divisions cease and be thyself our King of Peace.*

*REJOICE! REJOICE! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

I commend to you this wonderful season of Advent as a time for reflection with scripture, prayer, and worship. I invite you to observe a Holy Advent. My Advent prayer for each of you is that God will meet you at your point of deepest longing and greatest need and that you will be able to rejoice in the greatest gift given – Jesus our Messiah. It is the birth of this child wherein lies our one true hope.



# Advent & Christmas at a Glance

Thursday, November 30: Join the Adult Advent Choir at 7:00 pm

Saturday, December 2: Advent Soul Care from 9:30 am – 11:00 am

Sunday, December 3: Advent 1; Children's Costuming for Christmas Eve in New Catacombs;

Tuesday, December 5: Noon Eucharist (no Morning Prayer)

Wednesday, December 6: Children's Choir Rehearsal 4:00 pm – 6:00 pm

Thursday, December 7: Join the Adult Advent Choir at 7:00 pm

Saturday, December 9: Explore Ascension from 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm

Sunday, December 10 (morning): Advent 2; CAYG Wreath Sale Delivery; Children's Costuming for Christmas Eve in New Catacombs

Sunday, December 10 (evening): St. Nicholas Night Market from 5:00 pm – 7:00 pm

Tuesday, December 13: Noon Eucharist (no Morning Prayer)

Wednesday, December 13: Children's Choir Rehearsal 4:00 pm – 6:00 pm

Thursday, December 14: Join the Adult Advent Choir at 7:00 pm

Saturday, December 16 (morning): Greening of the Nave as well as practices for Service of Lessons and Carols from 9:00 am – 12:00 pm

Saturday, December 16 (afternoon): Children's Pageant Rehearsal 1:00 pm

Saturday, December 16 (evening): International Christmas Party from 5:00 pm – 8:00 pm

Sunday, December 17: Service of Lessons and Carols at 9:00 am and 11:00 am

Tuesday, December 19: Noon Eucharist (no Morning Prayer)

Thursday, December 21: Legacy Seniors Ministry Christmas Luncheon 12:30 pm – 2:30 pm

Sunday, December 24: Christmas Eve Services 6:00 pm and 10:00 pm (Note: no morning services)

Monday, December 25: Christmas Service at 10:00 am

Sunday, December 31: New Years Eve Services at 9:00 am and 11:00 am



## Service of Lessons and Carols: Sunday, December 17

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 17. 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! For a history of the Service of Lessons and Carols, please see Father Kevin's article.

## 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 pageant and sing the great carols of Christmas, concluding with Silent Night by candlelight. 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 ring in the birth of Jesus!

## 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 (no livestream)

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 quiet to the festival celebrations on Christmas Eve. Childcare is not provided.

# Advent Devotional Suggestions



By Andrea Millard, Director of Prayer Ministry & Leadership Development  
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**E**njoy a visual treat with a spiritual retreat-like experience by checking out Bette Dickinson's *Making Room in Advent* (2022).

Preparation for the Christmas season can often feel busy and frantic, but it doesn't have to be this way. What if we stopped and listened to the movement and unfolding of God's plan around us? *Making Room in Advent* is an invitation away from the chaos and into the space where God is at work.

The unfolding of God's plan often happens in unlikely spaces, both in Scripture and in our own lives. Join Bette Dickinson as she moves through the story of Jesus' birth and the stories of the many people that were part of the journey. Each page is filled with an original painting that will fill you with hope and wonder during the Advent season. The twenty-five devotionals offer spiritual practices, breath prayers, and reflection questions that allow you to truly make room for God's work in your life, your community, and the world.

Learn more about the meaning of Advent – the coming of Christ by reading Tish Harrison Warren's *Advent: The Season of Hope*.

"Christians believe not just in one coming of Christ, but in three."

We tend to think of Advent as the season of anticipation before Christmas—and while it is that, it's also much more.

Throughout its history, the church has observed Advent as a preparation not only for the first coming of Christ in his incarnation but also for his second coming at the last day. It's also about a third coming: the coming of Christ to meet us in our present moment, to make us holy by his Word and Sacrament.

In this short volume, priest and writer Tish Harrison Warren explores all three of these "comings" of Christ and invites us into a deeper experience of the first season of the Christian year.







## Advent Soul Care

**Saturday, December 2 from 9:30 am – 11:00 am**

Ascension Hunt Rooms

Soul Care features a morning of quiet prayer, gentle reflection, scripture meditation, and holy listening. Our special focus will be on the season of Advent. Sign-up on the Church Center app.



## Advent Noon Eucharist

**Tuesdays, December 5, 12 and 19**

Join Ascension Clergy and Staff for an Advent Noonday Eucharist on three Tuesdays: December 5, 12 and 19. We will gather in the chancel choir stalls. Join us for this special time of prayer and devotion at the beginning of our liturgical year as we both remember and anticipate the coming of Jesus.

# St. Nick's Night Market



**Sunday, December 10 from 5:00 pm – 7:00 pm**

For the last two Advent seasons, our church has hosted the St. Nicholas Night Market, an event where local artisans gathered to sell their wares and engage with our community. We had fun activities for kids, warm beverages for visitors, and beautiful music for passersby.

This Advent, the tradition continues! The St. Nicholas Night Market is scheduled for Sunday, December 10 from 5:00 pm – 7:00 pm. The Revival Chili food truck has agreed to join us once again. We will have the usual artisan tables, fun activities for kids, and an advent reflection space in the nave with instrumental music.

We hope to empower our artists and give them the opportunity to share their work. Likewise, we hope to create a space where newcomers can meet our community and visit our church. The St. Nicholas Night Market is a wonderful chance to connect with our neighbors, celebrate our artists, all while enjoying some Christmas shopping.

# A Brief History of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols



By Kevin Antlitz, Assistant Rector  
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**I have a very powerful memory of my first Lessons and Carols service. Susan and I were living in Boston at the time and a seminary professor invited us to join him for the service at Boston University's Marsh Chapel. We had never heard of "Lessons and Carols" and had no idea what we were in for.**

Led by a fantastic Director of Music and an excellent choir, we were absolutely floored by the beauty of the music and the thoughtful arrangement of Scripture. I don't remember every carol, but I vividly remember singing "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree" for the first time. This has since become one of my favorite carols and I may or may not have begged Gary Harger to include it in this year's service!

In college and seminary, I had spent years learning from Anglican writers including Dorothy Sayers, John Stott, and N.T. Wright. But this was my first real taste of Anglican *liturgy*. It was a majestic experience. While it's probably too dramatic to say it changed our lives, it's not an exaggeration to say this service played a part in our becoming Anglican.

Even after just one experience, it was abundantly clear why the Festival of Lessons and Carols has been a cherished Christmas tradition for almost 150 years. Like in so many places around the globe, this special service has become a beloved tradition at Church of the Ascension. I want to share a little bit about its history and meaning.

The very first Lessons and Carols service was held late at night on Christmas Eve in 1880. The faithful gathered in a large wooden shed in Truro, a cathedral city in the southwestern tip of England. The shed was a temporary home for the faithful as the stone cathedral was being constructed.

According to church historians, there is evidence that the medieval church crafted similar carol services, and these were held in the years leading up to 1880. That said, the Lessons and Carols service as we know it today was crafted by Bishop Edward White Benson (1829-1896). E.W. Benson was the first Bishop of Truro, and he would eventually become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1883.

The reason why Bp. Benson devised the service is quite interesting. It is said that the bishop was much disappointed with the alternative forms of revelry that took place in the local Cornish pubs around Christmas (read: ale, lots of ale). To encourage a more wholesome celebration of the greatest event in human history, he created this service of Lessons and Carols.



Sunday December 17  
 9:00 and 11:00 am services





In good Anglican fashion, Bp Benson drew from the Church's ancient liturgical tradition to create the liturgy. Following the medieval custom of a sequence of nine lessons, Benson designed the service around nine passages of Scripture (lessons) threaded with nine Christmas-themed hymns (carols). The idea was a hit! Some 400 people attended the first service in 1880. Truro has hosted it every year since.

Almost half a century after the first service in Truro, Lessons and Carols debuted at King's College Chapel in Cambridge, England on Christmas Eve in 1918. Though the service was created at Truro, it is now most widely associated with King's. This is thanks, in large part, to the BBC broadcasting the service almost every year since 1928.

The Lessons and Carols service at King's was arranged by the Dean of the College, a man by the name of Eric Milner-White. Although the service debuted at King's in 1918, the service – at least as we have come to know it – took its final shape the year after. In 1919, Milner-White made some slight changes to the order and selection of passages and music including beginning the service with the hymn "Once in royal David's city," all of which has become standard.

Our Lessons and Carols service at Ascension picks up on this great tradition. As with Lessons and Carols services around the globe, our service begins with this classic hymn. And, while the carol selections change from year to year, we read more or less the same lessons that were selected back in 1919.

As the Introduction to the 2018 King's College Order of Service points out, the lessons are the real true source of the service's power:

"Wherever the service is heard and however it is adapted, whether the music is provided by choir or congregation, the pattern and strength of the service, as Milner-White pointed out, derive from the lessons and not the music. 'The main theme is the development of the loving purposes of God ...' seen 'through the windows and the words of the Bible'."

I love how Dean Milner-White puts it here. As beautiful as the music may be, the central message of the service really is the loving purposes of God in human history. This comes through powerfully as we hear selections from Genesis, Isaiah, and the Gospels.

Together, these pivotal passages of Scripture tell the great drama of redemption. They point our eyes to the glory of our humble Redeemer and remind us of the hope we have in Jesus. It's hard to imagine a better way to celebrate one of the greatest events of human history: the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

If you've never experienced the Lessons and Carols service, I hope you'll join us this year on Sunday, December 17 at the 9:00 am or 11:00 am service. If the service has become one of your cherished traditions, I hope you'll consider inviting a friend to join you this year so they can experience the richness for themselves.

# Music in Advent!

## Children of Ascension

By Heidi Mayhew, Children's Choir Director

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There are two ways to participate in Lessons and Carols on Sunday, December 17 at 9:00 am and 11:00 am: through dancing or singing. Are you 5-12 years old and love to move to music? Dance may be for you! We will meet Sunday afternoons leading up to Lessons and Carols and learn a dance from Grace Witmer.

Do you love to make a joyful noise? Join us for just two rehearsals by ourselves (December 6 and 13 from 4:00 pm – 5:00 pm) and one rehearsal with the adult choir (Saturday, Dec 16 between 10:00 am and Noon)! Contact Heidi Mayhew for more information.

## Adult Choir

By Jennifer Miller, Choir Director

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Come join the choir in celebrating the season of Advent. We meet on Thursday evenings from 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm in Room 104. Over the course of four rehearsals, we will prepare for the first two Sundays of Advent (December 3 and 10) and the Service of Lessons and Carols (December 17). Contact Jenn Miller with questions and more information. Newcomers to the choir are warmly invited and welcome!

The rehearsal schedule for Advent and Christmas services is as follows:

Thursday, November 30: 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm in Room 104  
 Thursday, December 7: 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm in Room 104  
 Thursday, December 14: 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm in Room 104  
 Saturday, December 16: 10:00 am – Noon in the Nave





# CAYG Summer Mission Trip



By Josh Bennett, Director of Youth Ministry  
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**L**ike many of you, we here in youth ministry are in preparation mode. Preparing for Advent and Christmas? Certainly, but also for next summer!

In July, 25 youth and 5 leaders are heading to Louisville Kentucky to serve alongside YouthWorks, an organization that partners with communities and churches across the country. This will be our fourth year serving with YouthWorks and we could not be more excited!

So, what are we doing to prepare this far in advance? Well, hopefully by now you have been accosted by a gaggle of teenagers asking if you would like to buy a Christmas Wreath. These wreaths serve a larger purpose than simply sprucing up your home for the holidays! Each wreath sold helps to cover the cost of our trip to Louisville. This is possible because of our partnership with Bob's Greenhouse, a local family business, who are providing these wreaths at an affordable cost.

But what if you want to do more to support our youth in this endeavor? You can certainly give money towards the trip and offset the costs for our students; or, if you know of a student that would be blessed by a scholarship, you can give directly with that student in mind. I hope to make opportunities such as this trip accessible to anyone who desires to go.

Every time I have taken youth on trips like this, I am blown away by how the Lord reveals himself to us. Yes, we set out to love and serve others, but in that context, we so often find ourselves overwhelmed by his love and grace towards us!

So, I invite you to participate in what the Lord is doing in our youth. We need finances, but we are also in need of



volunteers for our weekly Sunday night gatherings. To consistently show up and show these teens that they matter is a life-changing act of service!

Perhaps it is a gift towards the mission trip, perhaps it is in serving as a leader at CAYG on Sunday nights. Either way, we are blessed when we follow the way of Christ - the way of self-giving, abundant love - and I hope you will join us!

For more information, please send me an email. Thank you for your gifts, your time, and your prayers





# Getting Ready for Christmas: Unto Us a Child is Born, Unto Us a Son is Given



By Catherine Slocum, Director of Children's Ministry  
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**I**t is fitting that we give gifts during the Advent and Christmas Season. After all, during this season, we celebrate the greatest gift ever given, God's gift of his son Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world.

Preparing gifts during the season of Advent is a deeply rooted and heart satisfying tradition. As we prepare for Christmas together as a church family to celebrate our Savior's birth, there are several fitting ways that you are encouraged to participate.

## Advent Cookie Share: November 26 – December 24

For the third year in a row, families with young children will have the opportunity to take Advent cookie kits home, make them as a family, and then happily deliver them as gifts to members over 70 years of age at their homes. Susan Glotfley expressed her delight in receiving the gift of cookies when she shared: "We couldn't have been more surprised to have a father and three young children deliver Advent Cookies to our door. The children had labored making and decorating these delicious cookies and were very proud of them. This was a nice opportunity to meet some younger people in the parish family." Beginning on Sunday, November 26 we will have jars filled with cookie ingredients ready for you to take home and bake and distribute to your church family.

## Lessons and Carols Service on December 17

Investing in our worship during Advent can be a great gift to God and others. There are two ways for children to participate in Lessons and Carols services this year - through dancing or singing. See the Music Ministry article for specific dates and how to participate!



## Costume Fitting on December 3 and 10

It is our custom on Christmas Eve to hold a family service where children are invited to help tell the gospel story. Each year children dress in costume and reenact Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem. All children are invited to participate in this gift of corporate worship. We will have costumes available between the services on December 3 and 10 for parents to select with their children. There will be one rehearsal on Saturday, December 16 at 1:00 pm.

## The Gift of Family: Candle Lighting

Each Sunday in Advent we light a candle together on our Advent wreath at both our 9:00 am and 11:00 am services. All are encouraged to create an Advent wreath lighting ritual at home as well. It is a delightful way to gather our families and ready ourselves for the celebration of Jesus' birth. Our Kids' Church Advent lessons also help us prepare to enter the mystery of Christmas. Plan to enter the season both at our worship services on Sunday morning and daily at home.



# Beautify the Nave

**Saturday, December 16, 9:00 am - Noon**

This festive morning is traditionally called the Greening of the Church. 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, sign-up on the Church Center app.





# Interested in Being Confirmed on Ascension Sunday in May 2024? Sign up for Foundations!



By Kevin Antlitz, Assistant Rector

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**I**n his massive book, *A Secular Age*, philosopher Charles Taylor traces the seismic shifts that have shaken western society over the last few centuries. As he writes in his Introduction, the aim of his book is to examine how we move “from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.” Unlike most of human history, we now live in a world where “belief in God is no longer axiomatic.” We now live in a secular age. Another way of describing our context is that we now live in a post-Christian culture.

This reality has many implications. One of the implications of this is that—broadly speaking—our culture’s understanding of the Bible, of who Jesus is, and the central tenets of Christianity are fading. One of the things this means is there are fewer people who identify as Christians. What is perhaps less obvious is that living in a secular age also impacts Christians. I think many folks who identify as Christians feel unsure about their faith – both what they actually believe and why. Many of us, in other words, experience a lack of clarity and confidence about the faith.

As in every age, we have a tremendous need to be formed in the faith. To address this need, we are excited to offer Foundations again this spring.

## What is Foundations?

As the name indicates, this course exists to establish a foundational understanding of the Christian faith. Our vision is that Foundations would foster clarity and confidence in the core beliefs and practices of the Church.

To help us grow in clarity and confidence, we will explore four crucial questions: *What makes us Christians? How do we pray? What should we believe? How do we live?*

To answer these questions, we will devote our attention to the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), and the Apostles’ Creed (our most ancient statement of faith).



In addition to these three essentials, we will also cover the Bible, the sacraments, and even some Anglican history to help folks get a sense of the distinctives of our tradition.

The course meets for 12 sessions and will be taught by Father Kevin with other clergy popping in. The day/time is still TBD.

## Who is Foundations for?

Foundations is for anyone with a desire to grow in their walk with Jesus. This course is particularly good for newer folks who want to get plugged in to the Ascension community and learn more about the church.

This course might be particularly interesting for people who are interested in becoming members of Ascension or for adults who are pursuing Confirmation.

One way to think of Foundations is an intensive discipleship cohort or a Community Group with a semester long commitment. Whether you are brand new to Ascension or you’ve been around for 50 years and want to mix things up, this course is for you.

While Foundations is open to everyone, space is limited and those pursuing Confirmation will have priority for the Spring 2024 course.

Registration for the course will open in December. Stay tuned! In the meantime, if you have questions, you can reach out to Father Kevin.



# Ascension Refugee Ministry: FAQ's of Welcome Circles



By Daniel Behrens, Ascension Missionary in Residence

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**S**ince May 2023, Ascension has walked with three refugee families in their first months in Pittsburgh. All families are doing well despite many challenges. I get to have a lot of conversations about Welcome Circles (formerly known as Community Co-Sponsorship) and hear a lot of questions, so I want to share with you some Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) with my responses, plus one bonus question. Enjoy!

## Where are the families coming from?

Our families are from Syria, although they all spent many years struggling to survive in a second country outside of Syria. Our partner resettlement agency, Hello Neighbor, continues to receive many Syrian families, but they have also settled families recently from Honduras, the Central African Republic, and Afghanistan and serve people from as many as 26 different countries. In the future, our Welcome Circle families could be from any part of the world.

## Is it hard to find housing?

Yes and no! Finding housing with a) space for a potentially large family, b) affordable rent, c) access to public transportation, and d) access to reasonably priced and culturally appropriate groceries is a big challenge. Finding landlords willing to rent to someone without any credit history or proof of income is also a big challenge! Thankfully, in our current partnership with Hello Neighbor, the agency is responsible for securing housing, and they work through long-standing relationships with landlords to tackle this huge need!

## Is it hard to find jobs?

Yes and no! It is very difficult to find a first job which a) pays enough to support a potentially large family, b) is reachable by public transportation, and c) is willing to accommodate someone with limited English. Thankfully,



this is another area which Hello Neighbor tackles with the help of a few specialized staff. Our team can help make connections or offer ideas, but we are not responsible for finding a job.

## How do you communicate with the families?

Professional interpreters are called in for medical appointments and official meetings with Hello Neighbor. We are also blessed with three Arabic speakers on our current teams, who do an amazing job handling many logistics and hard conversations. The rest of the time we have been able to navigate everyday interactions through

Google Translate. It is often humorous and a trial of patience, but the families have been very gracious, and their English is steadily improving.

## What are the roles on a Welcome Circle? Are there different kinds of time commitments?

There are many ways to support a refugee family through a Welcome Circle! One is by helping set up their home! This happens through a few workdays which are open to anyone. Many hands make light work! Another role is to be one of the fifteen people on a Welcome Circle. This requires some training and clearances before the family's arrival, and then takes different shapes over the following six months. Our point people carry an ongoing organizational responsibility, but the rest of the team (aka "Rovers") can say "yes" and "no" to specific tasks as opportunities arise. It has been great to see people in different seasons of life rallying together to support our first two families.



## Bonus question! Why are we doing this?

There are many good reasons to get involved with refugees and others settling in Pittsburgh, including a very straightforward reading of Jesus' command to love our neighbors! But at the heart, I want to continue in this ministry because of who our God is and who we as God's people are. In the story of Christ's birth, we remember that God himself chose the life of a migrant, forced to flee his homeland. God pays attention to migrants and even becomes one! And all through the Bible we see that God's people are a displaced people - exiled from paradise, passing through many trials, on the way to finding the true shelter that only God can provide. We go out of our way to love the sojourners in our land, because we know that through Jesus, God has gone out of his way to welcome us. Our small acts of love, from assembling a bed frame to listening to someone's story, remind us of who our God is and who we are called to be.



# Explore Ascension

**Saturday, December 9 from 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm**

Interested in learning more about Ascension? Anglican history? Contemplating membership? Want to get to know clergy and staff? Please join us on Saturday, December 9 from 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm for a great afternoon designed for those who are brand new, those who have been around for a few months and still feel 'newish', those who want to know more about Ascension and Anglicanism, as well as for those who want to become members. Childcare is provided. Please RSVP by filling out the form on our website/app or email [jess.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:jess.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org) and let Jess know you hope to join us.



# Fearfully and Wonderfully Made



By James Scannell

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*For this issue, I chose to interview Jeff Mulkern. I met Jeff and his wife Joyce in the “Foundations” class. You’ll recognize him as the guy with the white-tipped cane. He is witty, devoted to Jesus, and is now blind. Talking to him gave me new ways to think about community and about facing challenges. I hope you enjoy hearing his perspective.*

**James:** I'd like to ask about how you came to Ascension.

**Jeff:** We moved here a couple years ago after church hunting. I had to go to a church I could get to by bus. Someone at Elfinwild Presbyterian Church suggested we try Ascension. The first time we went to Ascension, we couldn't find it. The service was under the tent because of covid - we heard the music and I said, “If we follow the music we will be saved.”

**James:** That's funny! Tell me about whether you have been blind your whole life.

**Jeff:** No, I have Retinitis pigmentosa. I had full daytime vision growing and up and through my education years. I was always blind at night, but I could see car headlights and streetlights, so I could navigate. Vision gradually fades away over decades. They told me at age 19 I would someday lose my vision, but they couldn't say exactly how quickly. 25 years ago, it totally faded away. The good thing about that is this: One of my coworkers said to me before I retired, “You think I look like I did 15 years ago!” I said, “Yes!” and she gave me a kiss on my head and said, “Bless you!”

**James:** That's a great story.

**Jeff:** Now at this stage of my life everyone is good looking till proven otherwise!

**James:** Before I ask more about your blindness, what else would you like people to know about you?

**Jeff:** Apart from being blind? I always like people to know I have a loving

wife of 38 years - and that makes a big difference because family is everything. Her name is Joyce. And my basic philosophy is that most everything in life is better outdoors. Whether it be church, a cup of coffee, reading, or meeting up with friends, outdoors is where I like to be. I like to be outside, and I like to be around people.

**Joyce:** We have a bicycle built for two.

**James:** Cool, who drives in the front?

**Jeff:** Not to worry, Joyce drives. I'm the mechanic.

**James:** Wow, that's fun! I hope you don't feel I'm only interested in your disability, but of course my column is called “Fearfully and Wonderfully Made” so I focus on how God made us beautiful even with our challenges.

**Jeff:** Very good. It might come up later and maybe you can relate, but people come up to me occasionally and they feel compelled to pray for my vision to be restored. They're almost



disappointed when their prayers don't resolve in an on-the-spot miracle. I'm sure every person with a disability has probably encountered that, but of course I still love the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all the same. It doesn't diminish my faith. We are beautifully made, I'll agree.

**James:** What have people done or said that was helpful or hurtful?

**Jeff:** I try to take a positive view towards everything including my encounters, so I'm not hurt that often. I always look for the good intentions behind whatever people do. In terms of what is helpful to me - it's sometimes big and sometimes small. The crossing guard down the street knows my name. I go for walks and sometimes I get lost because I miss the crosswalk. In this neighborhood, if I hear someone hollering, "Sweetheart, are you lost?" or, "Bro, step this way!", I know they are talking to me! I take the help in any form God sends it. Thus, if you need to ask my preferred pronouns, they are "sweetheart/bro".

Going back to my working career - even 30 years ago - the adaptive equipment was terrible. But the guys in the IT department where I worked took this as their personal technical challenge; they didn't care if management allocated the time or not. They would spend hours - if that's what it took - to get my equipment working. That was a blessing. Another guy made a custom bike for Joyce and me, and then made a second bike so that I could go biking with him and the guys.

There are big ways and small ways that people help. I look at the good in all. One Sunday I got on the bus and the bus driver commented, "Why weren't you at church last week?" God is watching over me in many ways. People aren't intentionally insensitive. They just don't always appreciate what I can do or that I'm very well educated. But that's rare, fortunately. Life is good.

**James:** You are so inspiring. So many people struggle with less and are more bitter. Tell me more about how you have avoided bitterness.

**Jeff:** My parents always looked for the good and the bright side. That was even when I had usable day time vision. Life is meant to be enjoyed; you look for the good and the pleasant. As the eyesight faded, it was a riddle to be solved, not something to be bitter about. So, I had to learn to use that white cane. My teacher took me to the Cathedral of Learning which is full of stairs and strange hallways - it was a riddle to be solved. I was slow at learning braille. I called the Lutheran braille workers and they sent me the whole Bible in braille - it's like 20 feet in shelf space! If I missed a word, I could ask Joyce because she had the same translation, and she could find the word. The Bible has been used as a reading primer for centuries - that was another riddle to be solved.

Technology is always a challenge. It has gotten better and better - I never dreamed I'd have a phone that could talk to me, and I could talk to the phone and that it could give me directions. On a good day my phone will get me within 15 feet of the door I want to find. If I go to the JCC and end up 10 feet from the door, the guard may say, "You're way off." I'll tell him, "In the world of the blind, if I get within 10 feet of the door, I am not 'way off'!"

**James:** I'm thinking about how you are good with interdependence - meaning our culture values independence, but God made us to need each other.

**Jeff:** I can get lost in a crowded room really easily; I'm always looking for those subgroups to connect with. Most recently I joined one of the Community groups at Ascension. I can only talk to a few people at a time - it doesn't matter if there are 500 people in a room or 100 people - so I like to break it down to those smaller subgroups. And yes, I depend on those people to remember who I am and watch over me, and when there's a need they are able to come around and help out a little bit.

**James:** I was thinking about Joyce specifically.

**Jeff:** I think of Joyce every day! Life would be very different. I can't imagine

what life would be like without Joyce. It makes a huge difference... I love to go for walks and so does Joyce. I could stoically say I'd like to walk around without Joyce. But part of the reason we moved here two years ago was so I could get around - sidewalks, traffic signals, lots of other people out - I can hear where they are walking. This was easier when ladies wore hard heels. Now they wear sneakers, it's harder! I'm never independent of the world in which I navigate. We looked for a place with green space, sidewalks, places I could walk by myself, and excellent bus service. You can think of the bus as a sense of freedom for the blind or a limitation for people who think they should be able to drive everywhere - it's a matter of perspective.

I'll never be a mystic loner. I love people. In the Squirrel Hill neighborhood where I live, the guy at the newsstand knows who I am. The guy who is always selling raffle tickets knows who I am. I'm embedded in the community.

**James:** That's so interesting. I love the way you value small interactions. I love them too. I feel connected in tiny ways with each one.

**Jeff:** One of the ways I meet people is when little dogs chase the white ball on the end of my cane. I also meet people with "double wide" strollers all the time. We have to figure out who needs to yield to whom.

**James:** I'm so happy I met you. I'd like to hang out more. You are fun. I'm hoping I can tell you more about my story. I'm into learning from your experience. I am so glad we talked.

# A Warm Big Family



By LuAnn Pengidore, Director of International Ministry  
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**T**his is an email that I received recently from an international student:

**Dear Sir/Madam. I hope this email finds you well. I'm a first-year graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh. It was the first time I left my own country for a foreign country and am without local friends and groups, and always hit a brick wall because of the language. My friend told me that there is a warm big family to make friends at your church and learn spoken English, I am looking forward to it very much. I am a kind, optimistic, positive and cheerful boy. I hope you can allow me to join the course and make friends with you. Looking forward to hearing from you.**

Ascension's growing reputation as a warm big family motivates us to continue! Praise the Lord. What does this look like in practice?

One class that has this feel of a big family is the Conversation Café on Wednesday mornings. Eight groups of 3-5 students huddle around tables with coffee and Korean cakes from 10:00 am -11:30 am in the Hunt rooms, laughing with the many volunteers.

The groups discuss various cultural questions like views on retirement or personal experiences of culture shock. Laughter always erupts from various groups and there is much chatter when the Café ends and students exit.

After a break, 10-15 students stay to practice folk songs, hymns, or Broadway songs with Lara McGill, who ingeniously works on their pronunciation and grammar before singing the songs with them. It is common to see moms quietly exiting and entering the room from the childcare room where many faithful volunteers play with their babies. These moms have expressed their heartfelt thanks for this gift of childcare. This safe space allows them to enjoy a personal and refreshing time with others.

Conversation Café and Song Class are just two of the 14 classes (not including five Bible studies) that we offer each week to internationals - and a way that many Ascension folks steward their God-given gifts for the Kingdom. And it is here where the 'warm big family' is experienced!

On Wednesday mornings before class, Sophie Bernardi meets with a group of 4-6 women who are enthusiastically reading through the Jesus Story Bible, asking great questions, and sharing their lives. Later that evening over pizza, three young 20-something guys - Caleb Shook, Josh Oliver, and Logan Stahl - lead a more advanced English learner study on God's plan for redemption through the Old and New Testaments using the Discovery Bible Study method.

Personal invitation and interaction have been key to the formation of our big warm family. Here are just a few scenarios that I know of! Some reach out to students on the weekends by inviting individuals and families to holiday parties, coffee, or lunch. Others invite internationals to vocabulary games on Sundays or for walks. Others stayed in the international cottage at the retreat and invited them to enjoy hot chocolate around a campfire in the evenings. Others have been invited to Russian language lessons and offered tutoring in writing. Some internationals were invited to community groups or to volunteer with the homeless or special needs ministries. Others cheerfully hang around for lively discussions with internationals after church.

Another opportunity to build a warm family relationship is through field trips. One such trip was to the quiet 44-acre Botanical Gardens near Greentree, where a fun and diverse group of Afghan, Persian, Latino, Chinese, Indian, and Kazakh students hiked around the purple flowered meadows and through the red and yellow forest. There was much posing for family photos and talking about jobs, the weather, and hopes that they have. We also picked pumpkins and apples at Trax farm. For many students, particularly those from populous cities, these countryside visits are highlights of their stay in Pittsburgh.

Most importantly, on Thursday afternoons, several of us gather to pray over Zoom (you are invited!) for needs that students share with us, bringing the family of internationals before the throne of grace. We prayerfully read through a list of names from each of the classes and Bible studies and simply ask God's favor. We also pray for volunteer needs. God has graciously answered so many prayers - providing jobs, scholarships, faith, and real healing for people.

Other ministries help too. Moms and dads with new babies appreciated your visits and gifts of warm casseroles as they have become part of Ascension's meal ministry. Others, really struggling with English, have expressed their appreciation for the "Monday Office Hours" program that Daniel Behrens facilitates. Ask him more about it!

Thank you, Church of the Ascension, for being the heart and hands and face of Jesus to our international friends. Most of all, thank you for your hospitality - letting others experience the warmth of our big church family!



# College-Age Ministry



By Jess Bennett, Curate

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**O**ver these months since stepping into the role of leading Ascension's college-age ministry, I've been taken aback by the depth of trust, humor and sincerity that mark this group.

What I've encountered is a group of young people (some students, some in the workforce) who take their faith, their relationships, and their lives seriously. They bring their full selves to our weekly gatherings — their full, complex, goofy and genuine selves — and as a result, the friendships formed are true and trusting.

To give you a glimpse of what I've gotten to see in them, I've asked our college-age folks to consider the question, "What do you wish our church congregation knew about you?" Their responses are below. I hope that reading these is an encouragement, even a challenge, and sparks a curiosity in you to get to know these delightful humans too.

"We really love it when you talk to us! Coming to church feels like a breath of fresh air when we're surrounded by campus all the time. College feels really transitory and sometimes it feels like I'm just passing through and on the outside. Thank you for seeing us and the good in us!"

"A lot of people think college aged kids are spoiled or lazy, but this is not the case at all. Being a college student can be tough, as there are a lot of things we juggle around along with our studies — extracurricular stuff, jobs, etc."

"I would like people to know that I am generally tired at the moment but happy to be around others....I think sometimes I'm not entirely willing to get too close to adults I meet at church for fear of not being accepted."

"The church often forgets that college aged people are re-learning how to live their lives as both independent adults while still feeling like teenagers."

"College students are stuck in a liminal space between teen-dom and adulthood. I want to have grown-up

adult conversations, but often I feel that I don't know enough, or won't be listened to.

"I wish the congregation knew we are struggling to come to terms with our faith and what it means to be a Christian."

"Being young shouldn't invalidate my experiences. Don't think less of me, my experiences, and my life problems because I've lived for less time."

"If you see me in church, come talk to me! I'm always down to get lunch."

"We want to be fully a part of the membership of the church — not just in our own category."

"It can be hard to be seen as a "young adult" because it limits our interaction with the church in a time when having that interaction could be crucial."

"The college group at Ascension is a great community and always a highlight of my week."

"You can come to college students for advice and good conversation!"

# Testimony from Peter Foster

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*"For strength is made perfect in weakness, rendering him a better man who by means of his infirmity becomes acquainted with the power of God. For how could a man have learned that he is himself an infirm being, and mortal by nature, but that God is immortal and powerful, unless he had learned by experience what is in both?" – St. Irenaeus (180 A.D.).*

**A**s many of you know, I underwent a liver transplant in May. After praying and waiting several months for an organ, my first cousin Amy was a living-donor match and gave me a substantial portion of her liver.

Having grown up at Ascension and spending my college years away from home, it was a blessing during this challenging period to live once again in Pittsburgh and be able to worship with all of you - if only from the back pew and with a mask on.

In March, I spoke in front of the congregation on a Sunday morning and shared with the community what I was going through. I asked for your continuing prayers and explained my need for an organ donor.

The response from you was overwhelming!

Within days, my parents and I received several messages from members of the church offering to donate parts of their livers - one from someone I've known since I was a child at Ascension and another from someone I had only just met.

Please know how humbled and thankful I am for these selfless acts. I praise God for Ascension and for the believers here who are the body of Christ at Ellsworth and Neville. I am forever grateful to everyone who prayed for me and Amy and supported us so lovingly.



I am thrilled to report that Amy and my surgeries were successful. The recovery period over the summer was long and difficult, but neither of us developed any complications. Today, we are making steady progress, and our livers are each regenerated.

Amy is back working as a history teacher in Cleveland, and I returned last month to law school at the University of Michigan. My classes are going well, and my health is better than it has ever been. With a new liver, the disease I was born with is no more.

Although I am back in Ann Arbor, you are always in my heart and a profound blessing. I look forward to worshipping with you over my Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks.

In Christ,  
Peter Foster



# February Women's Retreat: Wisdom's Feast

By Rachel Kornfield Becker

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*"Get wisdom... Prize her highly and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her" (Proverbs 4:7-8).*

**P**roverbs personifies wisdom as a woman who invites people to a sumptuous feast (Proverbs 1:22-33, 4:5-13, 8:1-9:6). Those who seek her find life, those who do not become trapped in destruction. Jesus reflects on the Kingdom as a feast to which all are invited (Matthew 22:1-14). According to James, wisdom is both relationally transformative and accessible (James 1:5, 3:13-18). But what does it look like to accept Wisdom's invitation and feast on that which gives life?

Go deeper with Ascension's intergenerational community of wise women at a retreat on February 10, 2024. Speakers include Lauren Scharf on wisdom in the Bible, Robin Capcara on female wisdom in church history, and Suzanne Werder on experientially seeking the wisdom of the Spirit in our lives. One of the highlights from last year's retreat was spending the day at tables of four in which people went deep in sharing, prayer and providing wise support. We plan to use that format again. If you have questions, seek out our planning team: Stacey Regan, Sarah Gilmer, Nicolle Maurer, Rachel Becker, and Diane Wahl. Don't worry - a physical feast will also be part of the day.

While hope is on the horizon for future retreats, we will only have 40 spots available given continued space restrictions with construction. Stay tuned for registration starting just after the New Year!






LEGACY  
SENIORS  
MINISTRY

*Christmas Party  
& Luncheon*

Thursday, Dec. 21

12:30-2:30PM

\$20/lunch  
(1st time free)

RSVP: [kafisher208@gmail.com](mailto:kafisher208@gmail.com)

## Legacy Christmas Luncheon

Thursday, December  
21 from 12:30 pm –  
2:30 pm

Join with our fellowship of seniors as we eat delicious food, sing carols, and enjoy a special Christmas program.





# NEW YEARS EVE

REGULAR SERVICES, 9AM & 11AM



CHURCH OF THE  
ASCENSION

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

Website [www.ascensionpittsburgh.org](http://www.ascensionpittsburgh.org)

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