

Reflections



Volume 2011, Issue 11

First Presbyterian Church, La Grande, Oregon

December 2011

From Your Co-Pastors: 'Tis the Season...

December is upon us, and with it the enthusiastic shouts of "Merry Christmas!" and "Happy Holidays!" Everywhere in the world around us, we're hearing "Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas," even as we are bombarded with images of that perfect, joyous holiday we're all supposed to be having.

Yet, while it is "Christmastime" in our larger culture, we in the church have entered a different kind of season in Advent. "Advent" means "coming" or "arrival," and it is about waiting, with hope, expectation, and anticipation, for the arrival of God's Kingdom on earth. As one author puts it, "Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God." Thus, during Advent, we are invited to enter into contemplation and prayer, self-examination, and repentance, not unlike we do at Lent. As we take an honest look at all that is contrary to God's will in the world and our own lives, as we recognize our brokenness and offer ourselves up anew to God's transforming grace, we come to a fuller desire for the coming of Christ's Reign.

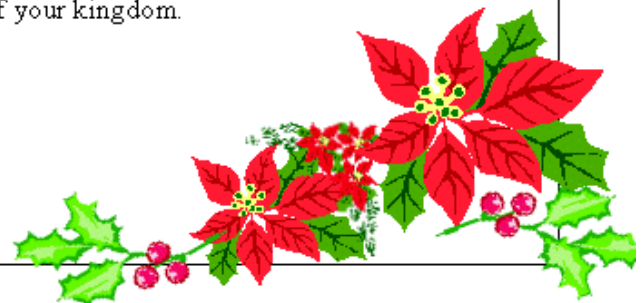
As a congregation, we will again enjoy the traditional delights of the season with our decorations, in our Spontaneous Christmas Pageant, and when we receive a visit from the Star Man on Dec. 18. We will celebrate together the great story of our faith as we hear the Lessons, sing the Carols, and take communion on Christmas Eve. These festivities are wonderful, but it is also important to find quieter spaces amidst the flurry to do the challenging spiritual work in preparation for life in the Kingdom.

As we do so, we recognize that many among us are living with a major disconnect. Sometimes, the festivities of the outer world seem deeply contradictory to the state of our inner lives. We have a hard time finding the "merry" in Christmas when we are grieving the loss of a loved one or a broken relationship, when Christmastime brings up painful memories. The isolation of anxiety and grief can make the winter darkness seem even drearier.

On December 22, at 7:00 pm on the longest night of the year, we will offer a Blue Christmas Service. This meditative worship will be a welcoming space of quiet, solace, and rest. We will take time for all those who grieve to gather honestly with their sadness; we will take time for those who are lost, lonely, brokenhearted, and in need of healing to gather with one another and offer prayers for every kind of brokenness people experience. We invite anyone seeking such a space, and all those who support them, to come, worship, and entrust our lives anew to the Lord who comes and walks with us through every kind of hardship, making way for healing. In closing, we share with you the following Advent Prayer, from the back page of the Advent Devotionals available in the back table in our sanctuary as a tool for your spiritual practice this season:

Lord Jesus, Master of both the Light and the darkness,
send your holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.
We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.
We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us.
We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom.
We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence.
We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.
To you we say, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, 121. *The Lord is Near: Advent Meditations From the Works of Henri J.M. Nouwen*, Mark Neilsen, editor.





From your Senior Supporter, Robin Ostermann

Christmas can be a difficult time of year for someone who has lost someone dear. Old memories of times spent together, unresolved issues, and just general overall sadness are normal feelings. These feelings, and many others, are in exact opposite to those that the media tells us we should have at this time. When certain Christmas carols and other holiday traditions and family gatherings bring our deceased loved one to mind at this time of year, we feel a cold shadow of emptiness pass over the moment, like a dark cloud drifting overhead on an otherwise sunny day. We are supposed to be deliriously happy, in a spending mood and oh, so busy!!

Instead, here are some ideas to honor our loved ones as we remember them:

1. Give a gift to a special cause in the name of your loved one. i.e. Hospice Light Up a Life Tree of Lights.
2. Make simple holiday ornaments that symbolically represent your loved one, and give them to family and friends.
3. Hang a holiday welcome wreath on your front door and keep plants or flowers in your home. The circle is a strong symbol of life; we often hear the term "the circle of life".
4. Lay a place setting for your loved one at your main holiday meal. The place setting can have the same soothing effect on the family as it acknowledges the spirit of your deceased loved one still in your midst.
5. Honor your loved one in your faith community by lighting a candle or contributing to the holiday floral arrangements that adorn the worship area. i.e. Poinsettia
6. Share an inspiring story about your loved one. Inspire others to share their stories also.
7. Send thank-you notes to those who were special to your loved one. Thank them for bringing the gift of friendship and love into the world through their relationship with your deceased loved one.
8. Give to someone an item that belonged to your loved one and share with the receiver why the item is special.
9. Make a new year's resolution that will honor your loved one throughout the coming year. As Judy Tatelbaum notes in *The Courage to Grieve*, "Our greatest tribute might be in how we live our lives after a loss."
10. Share your honoring activity with others.

At Christmas we celebrate the coming of God to dwell in our midst in the birth of Jesus Christ, the one who passed through death to new life. Our loved ones have gone through this same passage. Honoring our deceased loved ones at Christmas helps us to keep them and what we loved about them always in our hearts, and to see and touch the power of life beyond death. Bless you all this Christmas with God's healing touch.





Parish Nurse News

Buried beneath all the hustle and bustle of holiday preparations is our need to draw near to others and God. We give gifts, we cook, we decorate, we travel, we attend gatherings--all traditional parts of the Christmas season. But where do we find Jesus, where do we go when we need to get away from busyness and find our true selves? Where do we find God?

As your Parish Nurse I am concerned about how busy we make ourselves at this time of year--and what that can do to our bodies and souls. It can make us more susceptible to illness and mental stress. And it can be hard to be balanced with such stress. (I know I am speaking to myself as much as anyone!) To really enjoy this God-gifted season we must let go of what holds us and keeps us from drawing nearer to Him.

Joyce Rupp, in *Welcome the Light: Daily Devotions for Advent*, asks us "Where will we discover rest? What will help us welcome it? How can Jesus' promise of rest help us with our burdens? The rest that Jesus spoke of is more than a good night's sleep. It is the deeper peace that comes when we slow down inside, when we allow ourselves to let go of our self-made burdens, as well as the ones that society imposes on us. Can we let go of reading the newspaper for a few days in order to have sufficient prayer time? Can we forego getting our cards out before Christmas so we can enjoy our family and friends more? Can we resist our drive for perfection or production and let our pride take a blow when we do not achieve what we have planned?"

Research shows that if we do not rest in body and spirit our immune systems are seriously affected. Of course we cannot ignore illnesses of loved ones or self, family struggles, and work-related issues. But we do not need to let these things control our thinking. We can change our attitude and place our troubles in the arms of God. God wants the very best for us--to be whole in body and spirit. He gave us Jesus and what a wonderful gift that was. And that gift continues to give as Jesus promised in Matthew 11:28 "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest."

May you all find rest for your bodies and souls as you celebrate this Christmas.



Robin



There will be a Bell Concert on Monday, December 5th at 7:00 pm in the Sanctuary with performance by Bell Choirs, Brass ensemble, Organist, Cellist and Flutist. Free admission-Donations welcome



Rejoice!

Pastor Answers for Reflections

Do you prefer strawberry or vanilla ice cream?

Both prefer strawberry.

What is the title of your favorite book for children?

Keith ...Barnyard Dance

What is your snack food weakness?

Laura...chocolate chip cookies

What is your favorite game?

Keith...Uno

Laura...Apples to Apples

Poinsettias

We are accepting donations for the purchase of poinsettias to beautify the sanctuary during the Advent and Christmas season. Please notify the church office by Wednesday, December 21st if your donation is in memory or in honor of a loved one so this information can be included in the Christmas bulletin.



FRIDAY BACKPACK PROGRAM

The Friday Backpack Program has many reasons to celebrate as we begin our fourth year! As of this November, we are now serving 165 elementary children in all six school districts in Union County. Cove was our last district to join. YOU should celebrate with us, for your prayers, your food donations, and your financial support help us provide supplemental food each school weekend and special holidays to a group of very special children.

Please keep our children in your prayers and when you go to purchase groceries for you or your family. Adding a can of chili or a jar of peanut butter, pudding cups or oatmeal packets, tuna or mac and cheese for our children would mean so much to them.

You may leave your purchased donations in the lime green bucket near our church office and Carol will take your financial contributions.

Joy to the world and joy to Union County!



The Christmas Pageant

Calling all children and youth! The Christmas Pageant will be held during the service on Sunday morning, December 18th! Come early (9:00 am) to get into your costume or arrive in your own costume you have created at home. You get to be whatever nativity character you would like to be! It is an instant Christmas pageant so there is no practice needed! The Star Man gathering will follow the service so plan on staying and hearing the story of the Star Man and receiving a special star ornament for your tree.



The SAMI and Administration Committees give thanks for all of your support this fall as we asked for your estimates of giving. We have received estimates back from 51 people so far. We still have about a dozen people or families that gave us an estimate last year but haven't yet this year. If you have forgotten to send yours in, please help us out in our budgeting process by sending in your estimate. At this time our estimates are very close to last years totals at about \$102,000. We praise God for your giving and pray that as a Session, we may make wise decisions in the use of these gifts. We are also grateful that your giving has remained faithful throughout the year. The gifts we have received from those who gave us estimates are very close to what we budgeted.

Some of you have asked about the range of estimates we receive. We asked our Financial Secretary for the following information and thought it might be of interest to the congregation as a whole. The information is only intended to help individuals and families see what our congregation in general does. We are grateful for whatever level of giving each family is able to do.

Estimates of Giving 2011		Estimates of Giving 2012
\$100-500	12	5
\$501-1000	9	8
\$1001-2000	19	23
\$2001-3000	6	5
\$3001-4000	5	5
\$4001-5000	5	2
\$5001-6000	1	1
\$6001-7000		1
\$7001 +		1



Prayers for the Armed Forces...

We are praying for those we know in the armed services. Please fill out a slip in the back of the sanctuary if you have a name to add to this list.

Aaron Allen, grandson of Lowell and Donna Fuhrman, who is serving in Afghanistan

Kyle Houtz, grandson of Carrol and Marilyn Lester, who is serving at Seoul, South Korea.

Keith Spring, grandson of Florence and Bill Howell, who is serving in California

Aaron Johnson, grandson of Bonnie Kearns, who was deployed to Iraq

Travis Schaubes, son of Lee and Cindy Schaubes. He is a medavac helicopter pilot who has been deployed to Afghanistan.

Aaron Varland, son of Carla Varland, who was deployed to Afghanistan.



Neighbor to Neighbor

We served 447 people at the food distribution on November 19th which included 167 children. We gave out 149 boxes and also delivered 22 boxes to shut-ins. We were so grateful it wasn't snowing. It is hard for folks to keep warm while standing in line so we try to get them through as fast as we can. We are in need of soups, fruits, tuna, and the usual paper and personal items, laundry soap and cleaning items. All donations are welcome and greatly appreciated.

The Thanksgiving Dinner was wonderful from what I have been told. They served 350 people which is the most we have ever served. We are so grateful for the Celtic Society for doing all the work and for the other folks who showed up to help out. Lowell and I stayed home and had a small and quiet dinner with our granddaughter. It sure felt strange not to be there.

Our next food distribution will be on December 17th because of the holiday. We plan on doing the toy give away but we are not sure about the dinner. It will depend on if someone comes up and wants to do it the way the Celtic Society did. It is hard to let go of something that has been done for 25 years but sometimes it has to be done. We are all praying about it and will make a decision next Monday at our Board Meeting.

I guess this is the last newsletter for 2011. Wow, where has the time gone? I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has supported Neighbor to Neighbor Ministries this past year and to our church for their continued support. We could not do any of what we do without all of you.

In Christ's Love, Merry Christmas and a Blessed New Year.

The Neighbor to Neighbor Board and Donna Fuhrman



REFLECTIONS
First Presbyterian Church
1308 Washington Avenue
La Grande, OR 97850

December 2011



O Come Let Us Adore Him

Sunday, December 18
Children's Program and Star Man party

Thursday, December 22
Blue Christmas Service 7:00 p.m.

Saturday, December 24
7:00 pm Evening Candlelight Worship
with Communion

A decorative frame containing text and a drawing of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus.