



An invitation to follow...

Traditional scenes for the seasons of Advent and Christmas are easy to name. We recall a vision of Gabriel announcing the holy birth to a young maiden named Mary. A picture forms in our minds of a babe in a manger hovered over by humble parents. Images appear of shepherds huddled in a field guarding sheep and of an angel chorus heralding good news of great joy. And no depiction of the season would be complete without the visiting royalty/magi from the east, guided by a star of brightness and beauty, and bearing their precious gifts.



So why, you may be wondering, is there a portrait of a boat at water's edge on the front of this booklet? Some weeks ago, artist and church member Barb Ramaeker offered once again to provide the cover art for this publication. "Tell me what you think," she said. "All that I've come up with so far is the idea of a rowboat sitting at the edge of a body of water."

Immediately it struck us both. The season of Advent is more about an invitation to follow than just about anything else. Perhaps this is why the gospel of Mark never bothers with shepherds and angels and a babe in a manger. The beginning of this, the oldest gospel, is an invitation to follow. "As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me....' And immediately they left their nets and followed him."

Many, many thanks to Barb Ramaeker for providing such a thoughtful and beautiful cover for our Advent booklet this year!

Faithfully yours,

Richard J. Moore
First Presbyterian Church, Neenah

Celebrating Advent

An Advent Booklet has long been a tradition at First Presbyterian in Neenah. In the beginning, more than thirty years ago, the contents were mostly comprised of the order of worship for the Sundays of Advent and Christmas Eve. As time went on, devotional readings replaced bulletin materials and were supplied by the pastors and other staff members of the church. More recently, reflections have been written by church members.

This year's writers are Lisa Strandberg, Jim Morgan, Brian Hjerstedt, Teri Beyer, and Mark Bennett. We are very grateful to them for their thoughtful and heartfelt words.

Our hope is that this booklet may enrich your own spiritual life during Advent as we prepare our hearts to welcome once again the birth of our Savior.

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS CALENDAR

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

NOVEMBER 30

Worship

8:00 a.m. & 10:15 a.m.

Church School

9:00 a.m.

Regular classes for children and adults.

THURSDAY

DECEMBER 4

Worship – 5:00 p.m.

Christmas Blues: Service of Solace

For some people, Christmas is bittersweet. Dealing with the death of a loved one, facing life after separation or divorce, living with a chronic or terminal illness, coping with the loss of a job or dream, and other life events can make the jovial festivities of the season painful. This is the time of the year with the longest nights. Join us for a time of scripture, silent reflection, and healing prayer. The service will be followed by a soup and salad dinner in the Meeting Room. Child care will be available

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 7

Worship

8:00 a.m. & 10:15 a.m.

Church School

9:00 a.m.

Regular classes for children and adults.

Advent Brunch: 11:15 a.m.

Church members and friends, children and adults, gather for a festive meal. Make your reservations in advance. Presbyterian Women will be holding an Advent Fair before and after the brunch to benefit the Senior High work trip.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
DECEMBER 14

Worship

8:00 a.m. & 10:15 a.m.

Church School

9:00 a.m.

Regular classes for children and adults.

Advent Vespers & Appetizers

4:00 p.m.

This year's service entitled, "Savior of the Nations Come," is a festival of Advent/Christmas hymns. Our Chancel Choir will lead the singing, joined by youth choirs and handbell ringers. In between musical selections, brief poems, written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, will be read by youth and adult members of our congregation. As always, the service will be followed by Advent Appetizers in the Fellowship Hall. Sandwiches and beverages will be provided. You are invited to bring an appetizer to pass.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
DECEMBER 21

Worship

8:00 a.m. & 10:15 a.m.

Church School

9:00 a.m.

Regular classes for children and adults.

CHRISTMAS EVE
DECEMBER 24

Candlelight Service of Worship

4:00 p.m.

A service for families of all ages, as we re-tell the Christmas story and sing carols.

Candlelight Service of Communion

10:00 p.m.

One of my favorite things about my favorite brand of bread is the thickness of the heels. When toasted and buttered, these pillowy, crusty slices are something to behold—soft, crispy, and perfect.

It's that delectable, peerless treat I anticipate as I drop the bread into the toaster slots and push the lever down. And with something so good so surely on its way, I do what makes little sense for a person all about getting things done—I lean against the stove, cross my arms, and stand staring at the toaster, waiting, just waiting, for the bread to emerge gloriously transformed.

Yes, the time would go faster and be better spent if I sorted the mail or swept the hall instead, but what if I missed the conclusive “pop!” that would summon me to my post at the butter dish? Toast is so disappointing if it gets cold.

Sometimes I live my Christian life like that—waiting, just waiting, for those “days to come” in which Isaiah says people “shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks.” I anticipate passively the coming of the Kingdom, standing idly by waiting for it to emerge just as suddenly as those slices of toast.

God anticipated that in me—and in others. That's why Isaiah changes focus in the second chapter's fifth verse from the future to the present, saying, “come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.” That means *now*. We're not to *wait* for that time when nations will no longer learn war; we are to *lead* the nations to that end.

Thanks to Isaiah's words of hope for the future—and for the present—I will await with joy this Advent the celebration of our Savior's birth. But I won't just stand around. I'm going to get busy.

Prayer:

Creator God, thank you for the gift of today and the ability to fill it with works that help to fulfill your Kingdom. Grant me the wisdom and discernment I need to do your will, both during this Advent season and throughout the year.

Submitted by Lisa Strandberg

Meditation:

Isaiah 35:1-6

Joy has always been a blessing so easy to overlook. The Lord provides, but it is up to us to keep the joy in our lives through remembering those things that mean the most. Isaiah 35 verse 4 says, “Be strong, do not fear! He will come and save you.”

Life passes us by so quickly. I try to show my joy and appreciation of those things in my life through positive meditation and prayer. Also a smile never hurts! My daughter Callie is my constant source of inspiration for my joy. Children always find the joy in everything, because of their innocence, but is that not also wisdom we as adults can learn from? In our jobs, busy schedules, commitments and routines, I often will look back at the week while in church realizing I didn't find enough time like my daughter to laugh, play, sing, and just praise God for all the wonderful things that have been provided to us.

In this wonderful Advent season, my thoughts and prayers go to my entire church family for a safe and joyous time with family and friends. Let us rejoice in God and all the wonderful things that we have been provided.

Submitted by the family of Jim and Callie Morgan

joy

Dear Future,

I've seen the best.
I've seen the worst.
I've seen something better
than the first.

I've seen the lust.
I've seen the dust.
I've seen the cars
that turn to rust.

I've seen the scared.
I've seen the spared.
I've seen what happens
when no one cared.

I've seen the brawl.
I've seen the fall.
I've seen the world
from six feet tall.

I've seen the door.
I've seen the floor.
I've seen the result
to wanting more.

I've seen the pew.
I've seen the view.
All I have left
to see is you.

Meditation:**John 1:3-7, Isaiah 42:16**

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light . . . John 1:3-7 NIV Study Bible.

As we journey through the season of Advent, our days become shorter and our nights longer. We light our Advent candles and wait. What a wonderful time to contemplate both darkness and light.

The NIV Study Bible has 57 verses referencing light or lights. Starting with “Let there be light . . .” in Genesis and ending with “for the Lord will give them light” in Revelation. Darkness is referenced in 33 verses. In almost every verse relating to darkness, light is mentioned. Maybe to really understand light, we need to also know darkness.

Our Lord Jesus was born in the darkness of night, in a place unfit for delivering a baby by today’s standards. A stable, with a stone or dirt floor, and maybe some grass or straw lying around. Was there an oil lamp burning? Clean water and soap? Was it cold and uncomfortable or warm and cozy? Were Mary, Joseph, and Jesus outcasts or cared for? What do you see? Darkness or light? Possibly both.

There are so many dark things we can look at in our world today. We see wars raging, mounting national debt, violence, addiction, poverty, guilt and anger, just to name a few. Darkness is all around us. Is there a way we can bring Light to this darkness and help the darkness understand the Light?

Yes, there are wars, but many people are quietly working together promoting peace, feeding the hungry and teaching life skills. There are safe places where violence can be escaped and addiction can be conquered. Guilt and anger can be left behind and replaced with peace and joy. The darkness is not an enemy, only a place without Light. As we bring our Light (the Light of Christ) forward, the darkness will fade away. *I will turn your darkness into light.* Isaiah 42:16.

So, go get your Advent wreath and your matches, turn out all of the lights and sit in the darkness a while. Look, listen and feel the darkness. Then light your candle and discover the meaning of God’s Light!

Prayer:

Dear Lord, fill us with your Light this Advent season. Allow this light to shine brightly through and around us. Send this Light full of love, hope, peace and joy to all. Help us to remember all the darkness in the world cannot put out the light of one candle.

In God’s Peace – Submitted by Teri Beyer

Meditation:**John 15:1-7**

One of the things I enjoy about the holidays is seeing families and friends come together and the love that shines through these reunions. Conversations are often struck up while waiting in airports or flying on planes with regard to where the person sitting next to you is going, who they are going to see and how long it has been since they have seen each other. Combined with the obvious anticipation and excitement, the key element that shines through these conversations is *love*. The situation may involve a spouse returning home from a long business trip, a dear friend visiting a place they have not visited for some time or a student coming home to their family and friends. As you listen, you can hear the love this person has for the people they will soon see again or for the place they have not seen for some time.

Two of my favorite Christmas movies are the original “Home Alone” and “It’s a Wonderful Life”. While these movies contain entertaining plot lines with enjoyable characters and scripts, my favorite parts of both films are the endings where there is such a heartwarming outpouring of love for a reunion with a lost child or for a family enduring hard times.

Beyond the entertainment value of these films, we are reminded that this is the love God wants us to share with everyone every day. This is the fruit we are to bear and we bear it by abiding in his word and in his love. This passage from John reminds us that we can bear much fruit in our work and the people we encounter each day as long as we abide in God’s ways for our lives. We abide in his love if we keep his commandments. During this Christmas season, let us all be reminded of God’s command that we love one another and that we bear much fruit with everyone we are called to bear witness to. It is easy to love those who anticipate returning to us – God calls us to also love those less familiar to us – the needy, the dispirited, the person standing next to us who just needs a friendly smile or a helping hand. May we carry this loving spirit of Christmas with us every day.

Prayer:

Loving God, as we anticipate the love of friends and family members this Christmas, help us to obey your commandments to show love for others in our everyday lives. Help us to live in your word and bear the fruit of your love as we deal with others with kindness, gentleness and generosity. In your holy name we pray.

Submitted by Mark Bennett

The Christmas Joy Offering

Presbyterians have long celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ by giving generously to an Advent offering. The Christmas Joy Offering dates back to 1933, when the former Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) began the Joy Gift Offering to supplement inadequate retirement income and provide supplemental medical insurance for former ministers, missionaries, church workers, and their families. Our Christmas Joy Offering will be dedicated on Sunday, December 23. Special envelopes will be available throughout Advent and Christmas for your use.

In the former United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) a Christmas offering was first taken in 1960. Called the White Gift, its funds were used for general mission and world relief. In 1964, the name was changed to the Christmas Offering with receipts providing support for health and welfare concerns related to children. The emphasis on global work with children continued until 1973, when the offering was used to assist former servants of the church who were living on inadequate pensions.

In 1974, minority education was added and in 1979, nursing home care assistance was also included. The distribution of funds between the Board of Pensions and minority education was divided equally.

In 1988, the PCUS and the UPCUSA offerings were joined into one offering, the Christmas Offering Joy Gift. It was agreed that neither the Board of Pensions nor the racial ethnic schools would suffer in the merger of the Joy Gift and the Christmas Offering. To accomplish that, the 1987 General Assembly set the ratio of 65 percent to the Board of Pensions and 35 percent to the racial ethnic schools.

In 1989, the offering was renamed the Christmas Joy Offering, and in 1991, the 203rd General Assembly changed the distribution of funds to 50 percent to the Board of Pensions and 50 percent to the Presbyterian racial ethnic schools and colleges. The offering is currently reviewed every four years.

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