



UPLIFT Newsletter

The United
Presbyterian Church
of Blairsville, PA

DECEMBER 2020

It was New Year's Eve and we had gathered with some friends for our annual celebration—a table filled with delectable treats, a fabulous dinner, wonderful conversation and an evening of parlor games. At 11:50, we turned on the television and filled some glasses with sparkling grape juice. Five, four, three, two, one—the ball in Times Square fell, we raised our glasses and welcomed the New Year. Out with the old, in with the new. It was a reason to celebrate. And then the phone rang. Her father had been to the hospital. She and her husband gathered their things and left, not knowing what they would find when they got there. From cheers to tears in a matter of moments—and so 2020 began. I think we would all agree this has been one of the most difficult years we have had to endure. That's certainly true for my generation. The best thing to be said about 2020 is that it's almost over.

From a historical perspective, 2020 has been just one of many tough years. Disease, pestilence, natural disaster, political upheaval have at one point plagued every acre of ground that covers the globe. Trouble is a natural part of life in this world. In Romans 8, Paul speaks of “creation being set free from its bondage to decay....the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groaning inwardly while we wait for adoption, for the redemption of bodies...for in hope we are saved.” We all know some form of bondage, of being held prisoner by a weakness, an attitude, an enemy, a circumstance, a lie that everyone else believes as truth. We each have at some point been consumed by darkness or fear or helplessness or pain. We all know the longing for someone to break into our misery and rescue us, for someone to come into the midst of all that is wrong and make things right. We, like all creation groan to be redeemed, set free from what has been so that we can become the fullness of what God holds for us.

We have just started a new liturgical year as we've entered the Season of Advent. We are tired from all that has been and we long for something new. We have heard the promise of the prophets of a redeemer and we welcome his arrival into our circumstance. That's why we sing the ancient words, “O come, O come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appears... O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows put to flight...”

In the midst of the darkness we light the candles. Stumbling in the shadows we hear again the words of old—the promise of hope, peace, joy and love. Like captive Israel we call out “Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee...” As a people of faith our hearts are expectant in the hope of seeing the promise fulfilled in some new way. We know that if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation for the old has passed away, behold the new has come.

Advent is a season of anticipation: of waiting and watching, listening and exploring. We tell the stories of how God has been faithful to his people while knowing that God is still at work in the lives of his people today. We remember that just as he came to us as a child, walked with us, taught us, took up our burdens, redeemed us from our debt—so too he will come again in glory to bring us home.

There is an ancient Aramaic word cried out through the millennia, Maranatha, Come Lord, Come. No matter the age or the place or the circumstance in which its uttered, the plea is the same. Lord, in and of myself I am helpless. That which surrounds me threatens to consume me. I need you to come and set me free. I am yours and you have assured me that you are mine. Come into me and fill me with new life. Oh, the joy of our redemption.....

In Christ's Love,

Pastor Jim

Scripture Texts for Worship

The scripture texts for December are given for your study in preparation for Worship.

Sunday, December 6

II Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

Sunday, December 13

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Sunday, December 20

II Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:26-38

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 2:1-14 (5-20)

Sunday, December 27

Galatians 4:4-7
Luke 2:22-40

Sunday, January 3

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Ephesians 1:3-14

Our Faithful Flock

Your faithful prayers and acts of stewardship have been appreciated, especially during this year. It's been a time of change for us and the world as we have had to deal with a pandemic that most have only read about in history books. Our God is bigger and has been faithful to his church. Because of your faithful stewardship we have been able to pay our bills, retain all of our staff and reach out to those in need in the community. Thank you for your prayers and for your stewardship to the church.

Worship Assistants

December 6-2nd of Advent

Liturgist: Mary Anzelone
Advent: Terry & Barb Brown
Flowers: Pat & Janeen Swope
Ushers: Pat & Janeen Swope

December 13-3rd of Advent

Liturgist: Lon Ferguson
Advent: Brent & Tammy Ritchie
Flowers: Alice Santoro
Ushers: Pat & Janeen Swope

December 20-4th of Advent

Liturgist: Rick Shoemaker
Advent: Dennis & Nancy Gould
Flowers: Bill & Deb Lint
Christmas Poinsettias

Christmas Eve 7:00-Communion

Liturgist: Connie Bruner
Advent: The Bruner Family

Christmas Eve 11:00-Communion

Liturgist: Bobbi Monroe
Advent: tbd

December 27

Liturgist: Elizabeth Bruner
Flowers: Marilyn Neal

Offering Counters

Pat & Janeen Swope

Prayer Chain

The prayer chain is coordinated by the Adult Sunday School Class. If you have a prayer request or know of someone's need for prayer, please contact Nancy Campbell or the church office.

Advent Devotionals

A variety of Advent Devotionals are available for you. These guides are meant to help you as you move through the season to the coming of the Christ Child. You can pick one up at the back of the sanctuary or contact the church office and one can be mailed to you.

Year End Meeting of the Congregation

The 2020 year in review Congregational Meeting will be held Sunday, January 31st. The meeting will be held following worship. More details will be shared closer to the date.

Year End Reports

Committee chairs are asked to begin thinking about year end reports for the Annual Ecclesiastical/Corporate Meeting. Reports are due to the church office by Sunday, January 24th.

Bible Study Wednesday Mornings

Wednesday morning Bible Study meets at 10:00 a.m. in the Fellowship Hall. We ask that masks be worn throughout our time together, if possible. Please respect the space of others when choosing your seat. Pastor Monroe uses the sound system so as to be heard clearly. For those who would like to participate from home, we are set up to offer Bible Study via Zoom. If you are interested, please call the church office for more details.



We will celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion at our Christmas Eve Candlelight Services at 7:00 and 11:00 p.m. Those who wish to receive will be asked to come forward to receive the elements from gloved elders and deacons. Those who wish to remain in their pew will be served where they are.

2021 Offering Envelopes

Offering envelopes for the New Year are available for you to pick up at the back of the sanctuary. If you do not have church offering envelopes and would like a box set, please contact the church office at 724-459-7991. If you would like your envelopes mailed to you, please call the office.

Financial Statements

End of the year financial statements will be mailed early to mid-January. If you would like your statement earlier, contact the church office at 724-459-7991.

Update—Coats-For-Kids Drive

A big thank you for your continued support and generous donations toward the Coat Drive. So far this year we were able to provide new winter coats to 33 children and will continue purchasing coats through the winter months when we are made aware of a need. Our program supports children eligible under the IC-CAP food program for Blairsville Borough, children in shelter at Pathway and Family Promise, and those referred through members of our congregation or Blairsville residents who know of a need. We have provided coats for infants through high school for the past six years. Again, many thanks for your ongoing support of the Coats-for-Kids Program.

Passing of a Friend

Some of you may remember Ann Miner, a seminary student who did an internship with us a number of years ago. Ann died on August 25, 2020 at the age of 67. Her years were filled with meaningful and life giving experiences. After college, she was commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Air Force earning the rank of Major. She earned several masters degrees in psychology and a doctorate from Yale University. She taught at the Air Force Academy, Carnegie Mellon and IUP. After responding to a call to ministry, she attended Pittsburgh Theological Seminary where she earned a Masters of Divinity and was ordained as a Presbyterian Minister. She served congregations in Homer City, Creekside and Guernsey, Wyoming. After retirement, she did substitute teaching and was in the process of becoming a rural letter carrier. A varied life of faithful service, we thank the Lord for her ministry.

Food Ministries and Support

Each year, 1160 WCCS Radio of Indiana sponsors a Turkey-thon to raise money to assist local families through United Way. Our Deacon's Pantry has been a beneficiary of some of those funds to help meet needs in this community. This year we were entrusted with \$750 in gift cards from Walmart and Giant Eagle. We appreciate our partnership with them.

Throughout the year there are many others who share their resources by supporting the Deacon food pantry: the United Methodist Church, students and teachers from Blairsville Schools, Community Service groups, Fraternal organizations and many generous individuals.

At Thanksgiving, the deacons distributed 25 baskets of food to provide local families with holiday meals.

Continuing Our New Way

We're glad for all the positive feedback received on virtual access to Sunday morning worship services. We are thankful for the time and technical assistance given by Jonathan and Doug Clayton, and all those who have volunteered to be trained on the equipment. We will continue to broadcast the services online. Because of the digital format, we have had to acquire a higher level of copyright usage and we continue to make updates to our equipment. We thank you for your patience as we learn how to use new technology. We are grateful for the ways our ministry is both enhanced and broadened.

Opportunities Moving Forward

We are continually in need of volunteers to be trained to run new worship equipment. We are very grateful to those who have stepped up already. Please see Dennis Gould or contact the church office to be a part of this new venture.

As We Gather

Because of the nature of this pandemic we understand the responsible caution being taken in returning to in person worship services. The best time for you to return is when you feel healthy and safe in social situations. It is impossible to guarantee safety, but be assured we are doing everything in our power. If you are in the building and notice anything that brings you concern, please let the pastor or church office know so the issue can be addressed.

Mission Moment

Gelling too Soon—Beloved Christian educator Lib Caldwell gives and gets during Facebook Live gathering

In Gail Godwin's book "The Finishing School," which features an older woman and a 14-year-old girl, the woman tells the girl she can tell by looking whether a person has congealed. That person will have no more surprises, the woman tells her young friend, and to avoid the trap she must constantly be on guard against gelling too soon. It's a valued vignette in one of the Rev. Dr. Lib Caldwell's favorite books. Caldwell said during a recent Facebook Live interview with the Rev. Dr. Lee Hinson-Hasty that her soul also requires that kind of space for creativity. "I never planned my life," said the professor emerita of McCormick Theological Seminary, who's now a visiting faculty member in religious education at the Vanderbilt Divinity School. She began teaching at McCormick about 30 years ago with the agreement she'd begin working on her doctorate within two years of her start at the Chicago seminary. "So that's what I did," said this year's winner of the Excellence in Theological Education Award given by the Committee on Theological Education, which in non-pandemic years is awarded during General Assembly. "In 30 years of teaching, I've never done the same thing twice. I've wanted to be new every day." Hinson-Hasty, senior director of Theological Funds Development for the Committee on Theological Education and the Presbyterian Foundation, titled his interview with Caldwell "When Kids ask Hard Questions." He had several examples: "Where is God? How do I talk to God? How do you know there is a God?" The best advice Caldwell has for parents and educators — and during the pandemic, parents are increasingly finding themselves as their children's primary educators — is to "first, take a breath." "If a question leaves us speechless, it means we haven't thought about it," Caldwell told Hinson-Hasty. If adults don't ask the hard questions, "how can they answer them for their child?" One possible answer to a hard question is, "What do you think?" That was the approach used by one famed Christian educator, Professor Sara P. Little, according to Caldwell, who studied under her. One day Caldwell heard Little speak to a group and then field questions afterward. "She would say, 'I have some thoughts about that, but what about you?' She refused to be the answer-giver," Caldwell said. When a child asks a difficult question, she said, a good answer is often, "Let's wonder about this together." Some questions posed by children come from personal experience. Caldwell said she once visited a museum with her sister and her two nephews. One of the boys saw a man asking for money, and so he asked his mother for money to give to the man. When he heard the man was homeless, Caldwell's nephew asked his mother, logically, "Why is he homeless?" Caldwell said she felt fortunate it was her job merely to teach budding clergy and educators how they might answer. Her sister, she noted, "has to live with it every day." For questions about the mystery of God, Caldwell said parents should first be comfortable with their own questions. "Are parents doing anything about their own spiritual formation? Do we talk about how our faith is lived in the world?" Our children watch us, she said. "They know everything we do." With her students, Caldwell asks them daily for their thorns and roses — their lows and their highs — but also their blossoms, the things they're looking forward to. She said she advises families to find things they can do together even during a pandemic: walking around the neighborhood, taking an even longer hike or playing music together. Or, as one family she knows does, dress up in costumes and rehearse and then put on a short play together. At the end of the 30-minute interview, Hinson-Hasty had a surprise for Caldwell: About 20 friends, colleagues and admirers had come together via Zoom to congratulate her on her award and to tell Caldwell how grateful they are for her many contributions.

Mike Ferguson, Editor, Presbyterian News Service

At Home Worship Resources

We continue to pass on faith building resources to use at home via email. The Presbyterian Outlook has been making available "Faith Formation at Home" and "Christian Education at Home." The first resource is focused more on family worship. The second is to assist parents in teaching Bible lessons to their children. The Christian Education Committee of our church has also invested in "Children's Bulletins." Each week, along with the "Christian Education at Home" resource, Children's Bulletins are sent via email for the children of our church. They include activities that reinforce the message of that Sunday. If you are interested in receiving either or all of these resources, please contact the church office at 724-459-7991 to be added to the email list. If email is not an option, a paper copy can be mailed to you.

A Note from the Pastor:

You may not realize it, but I am by my nature an introvert. That is part of the reason I do not take part in social media. As a pastor, my life is very much in the public eye and I appreciate a degree of privacy. There is a downside to that. In order for me to access others on social media, I need to open an account. If I want to hear my friends preaching on their Facebook page, I have to be on Facebook. I signed up (kicking and screaming). There is however nothing on my page. Each day I receive requests to “friend” good people. Because I do not have the time and energy to maintain online relationships, I have not accepted any of these offers. If you have made such a request and have not received a response, please do not take it personally. Frankly, my personal life is pretty dull and uninteresting (which is not a bad thing). I am, however, always available through email and can be contacted at pastor@r-church.com. There is also an antiquated contraption called the telephone. Please don't hesitate to call.

Pastoral Care

Because of health restrictions, visitors have not been permitted to enter hospitals and other care facilities. Clergy have also been advised not to enter personal residences as not to spread any disease unknowingly. If you have any pastoral needs, please contact the minister so some creative solution can be found.

January Newsletter

Articles to be published in the January edition of the UPLIFT newsletter are due to the church office by Tuesday, December 15th. Please call the office with any questions or concerns.

Help Starts Here

PA 2-1-1 Southwest is a free resource and information hub that connects people with community, health and disaster services in 11 counties through a free, 24/7 confidential phone service and website. If you have a concern or a need dial 2-1-1 or email info@pa211sw.org and you will be connected to an organization that can help.

Food for Family Thought

1. Suppose that, regardless of what clothing you were wearing, you always had to wear a button with a maximum of seven words on it. You can choose the message that goes on this button, but it must be worn at all times. What would it say?
**You can probably think of phrases your mother or father said that you vowed you'd never say to your child. Do you now find those words coming out of your mouth? Think of a positive message you would like your child to associate with you. Say it often—in words and deeds.
2. If you were in charge of creating a brand-new park for your town or city, what would the park feature and what could you do to make it truly different from any other park you've seen?
**Make a point of arranging special one-on-one time every month with your child. Create what author Matthew Kelly calls “carefree timelessness,” where just the two of you can talk, laugh, be together, and make memories that last a lifetime.
3. If you had to rank the twelve months of the year from your favorite to your least favorite, in what order would you put them? Grab a piece of paper and give it a try!
**Spend a few moments reviewing the family calendar. If it's too jammed with commitments, your family may be overscheduled. Remember this biblical wisdom: “To everything there is a season...A time to keep and a time to throw away.” Make sure you know what season it is for your family.
4. The fish and the cross are two symbols commonly used to represent the Christian faith. If you were asked to create a new symbol that would represent faith, what would it look like?
**As birthdays and other gift-giving occasions arise, think to include at least one gift that speaks of faith to your child. It can be a book, a medal, or a DVD that reinforces good values. It could even be as simple as a Bible verse bookmark. It will show that you value your child's spiritual nature.

From Humble Beginnings Came a True Gift

Ever since my girls were big enough to hitch a ride on a luggage cart, they've been in love with hotels. The run-of-the-mill places that our family visited before the pandemic seemed like king's palaces to the tykes, who couldn't wait to take a ride on the elevator.

How impressed the girls were with the plush pillows, flat-screen TVs and kid-sized refrigerators. Being able to commandeer the remote and get sweet treats from vending machines down the hall added to their delight.

I had those stays in the back of my mind when we recently read the story of Jesus' birth as part of a reading lesson for my 4-year-old daughter. Her 6-year-old sister sat with us to listen.

"The Beginner's Bible" tells the story that many Christians learn in Sunday school – that Joseph and a pregnant Mary arrived in Bethlehem and were told there was no room at the inn.

It was at that point in the story that I decided to ask the girls a question, "What if we arrived in Cincinnati and they told us, 'We don't have any rooms, but you can stay out back with the animals?'"

Seeing a look of shock on their faces, I explained that that's indeed what happened to Jesus' family right before his birth.

We went on to read how Joseph made a warm place for Mary to rest and that when Jesus was born, Mary wrapped him in strips of cloth and gently placed him in a manger. The significance of his birth would soon be known to the world.

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:8-12 (NIV)

Such humble beginnings! The king of peace and righteousness had not even a crib for his head.

At a time of year when it's easy to get caught up in material things, it's good to remember the circumstances of Jesus' birth: that he came to dwell among us, without the accommodations of a king.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," John 1:14 (NIV). "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

As my children grow older and re-read the story of Jesus' birth, perhaps even to their own children, I hope they remember the true gift of Christmas is not what the world gives us but rather the Messiah himself.

Darla Carter, Communications Associate, Presbyterian Mission Agency

