

From the Pastor

Dear Friends,

In many Latin American congregations Advent celebrations include the ritual of *Las Posadas* (the shelters). For nine nights in a row, December 16 through 24, children and adults assume the roles of Joseph and Mary or of the innkeepers, processing around the church or the neighborhood, moving from one designated site to the next. At each station the same ritual exchange is repeated. Joseph knocks on the door and says in a loud voice, "In the name of God, we ask those who dwell here, give to some travelers shelter this evening." From inside a chorus of voices responds, "This is not an inn; move on—I cannot open lest you be a scoundrel." As Joseph moves from one inn to the next, the innkeepers grow angry and even threaten violence, while the night grows colder and the young couple grows weary to the point of exhaustion.

For eight days this scene is reenacted until finally on the ninth day Joseph's request moves the heart of an innkeeper who offers the young couple all that he has left—a stable, which becomes the birthplace of Jesus. Then, in an outpouring of joy and festivity, those gathered on the final night celebrate the generosity of the innkeeper and the *posada* given to Mary and Joseph with song and dance and food and drink. The community recalls anew how the stranger at one's door can be God in disguise. (from "Hospitality" by Ana Maria Pineda in *Practicing Our Faith*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Josey – Bass, Inc., 1977).

The practice of hospitality, of providing a space where the stranger is welcomed and given shelter, is a recurring theme in the Bible:

"You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deuteronomy 10.19)

"The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow." (Psalm 146.9)

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35)

"Extend hospitality to strangers." (Romans 12.13)

"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2)

The New Testament Greek word for stranger is *xenos*, which forms part of the English word "xenophobia," the fear of strangers. The New Testament Greek word that is often translated into the English word "hospitality" is the word *philoxenia*, love of strangers. To practice hospitality then, is to love the stranger as a brother or sister. At First Church we have made a commitment to practice hospitality. The statement that appears on the front of the worship bulletin each week reminds us that *in response to God's unconditional love for all people made known to us in Jesus Christ, we are called to be a welcoming and affirming community... We welcome into the full life of the church all those whom God sends us.* The ministry of hospitality, *philoxenia*, love of the

stranger, is an important characteristic of the community of Jesus' followers. And it is a value our congregation has enthusiastically embraced.

Yet fear of the stranger, *xenophobia*, is still very much a part of our society. The day I am writing this the newspapers are reporting on a recently released FBI report showing a rise in hate crimes, with attacks on American Muslims showing the biggest surge. Assaults and threats against women, immigrants, African-Americans, Hispanics and others have also increased. Many people are living in fear.

Which makes me wonder, What 'Mary and Josephs' will be knocking at our doors this Advent season? Who will be in need of safety and shelter? Whose voices will be asking us, "In the name of God, we ask those who dwell here, give to some travelers shelter this evening."

And how will we respond? How shall *we welcome into the full life of the church all those whom God sends us?*

We are living in challenging and uncertain times. Fears abound. "But perfect love casts out fear." And because God's unconditional love for all people has made known to us in Jesus Christ, we can find courage to love the stranger. Our ministry of hospitality is more important than ever.

Sincerely,
John D. Paarlberg

At Home with the WORD

Daily Bible Readings from the Common Lectionary www.rca.org/athome
December 1st – December 31st

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|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Romans 15:4-13 | 17. Matthew 1:18-25 |
| 2. Matthew 3:1-6 | 18. Fourth Sunday of Advent |
| 3. Matthew 3:7-12 | 19. Isaiah 62:6-12 |
| 4. Second Sunday of Advent | 20. Psalm 96 |
| 5. Isaiah 35:1-4 | 21. Psalm 97 |
| 6. Isaiah 35:5-10 | 22. Titus 2:11-14 |
| 7. Psalm 146:5-10 | 23. Titus 3:4-7 |
| 8. Luke 1:46-55 | 24. Isaiah 9:2-7 |
| 9. James 5:7-10 | 25. Christmas: Nativity of the Lord |
| 10. Matthew 11:2-11 | 26. Isaiah 63:7-9 |
| 11. Third Sunday of Advent | 27. Psalm 148 |
| 12. Isaiah 7:10-16 | 28. Hebrews 2:10-18 |
| 13. Psalm 80:1-7 | 29. Matthew 2:13-23 |
| 14. Psalm 80:17-19 | 30. Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 |
| 15. Romans 1:1-4 | 31. Psalm 8 |
| 16. Romans 1:5-7 | |

Advent Sermon Series: The Story of Jesus' Beginning According to Matthew

Each of the four Gospels tells the story of Jesus from its own perspective and presents its own understanding of Jesus. Rather than harmonize the four differing views, the early church recognized the value in each of them and let their distinct voices be heard.

Our usual understanding of the Christmas story is the result of a combination of the nativity stories from Matthew and Luke (especially Luke). (The Gospels of Mark and John do not mention Jesus' birth.) But by conflating the two accounts we may miss Matthew's or Luke's distinctive theological voice. Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, for example, makes no mention of shepherds, angels or the birth in Bethlehem, while Luke's Gospel does not include the story of the wise men. Each Gospel tells the story in its own way and with its own theological purpose.

This Advent season rather than follow the Revised Common lectionary which draws on texts from various parts of the Gospel of Matthew, we will follow the practice of *lectio continua* (continuous reading) working our way sequentially through the first two chapters of Matthew. The *lectio continua* approach to preaching was a practice followed by many of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation. During his long ministry in Geneva, Calvin followed this ancient liturgical practice, preaching through most of the Bible.

Advent 1 (November 27)	Matthew 1: 1-17	The Genealogy of Jesus
Advent 2 (December 4)	Matthew 1: 18- 25	The Birth of Jesus (Joseph's Dream)
Advent 3 (December 11)	Matthew 2: 1-12	The Visit of the Wise Men
Advent 4 (December 18)	Matthew 2: 13-23	The Flight into Egypt

Post-Service Discussions in Advent

For four Sundays in October several members and friends of the congregation met in the parlor after worship for a discussion series on the future of the church in a changing culture. We want to continue that discussion, this time focusing on the texts from the nativity stories in Matthew.

The Advent texts from Matthew primarily address the question, "Who is Jesus?" It's a good question. Theologian Robert McAfee Brown once suggested that every few years we ought to forget everything we know about Jesus and start all over again. Perhaps Matthew can help us ponder the question anew. "Who is Jesus?" "What was God doing in the birth, life, death and resurrection of this man?"

How we answer those questions will also tell us something about who we are as followers of Jesus. What is God saying to the church today? What is God's word to the community of Jesus' disciples at the First Church in Albany? From Mary and Joseph's perspective the birth of Jesus was unplanned. His arrival disrupted their lives. What does Jesus arrival mean for us?

Christmas Eve Worship

At their recent meeting, the commission recommended and approved some changes in our Worship Services.

- Since Christmas Eve this year falls on Saturday. We will have one family service at 7:00 pm.
- On Christmas Day we will have our usual Sunday worship service at 10:30.

Hanging of the Greens

Advent is here! As the carol says, *Make your house fair as you are able, Trim the hearth and set the table....*

Since Advent means "coming in", we gradually decorate for Christmas over two weekends. On December 10th (Saturday), we will decorate the outside with wreaths and bows for the season. We will also put up the trees in the sanctuary and decorate the one in the lobby. Volunteers to help with this 1-2 hour project (starting at 9:30 A.M.) should contact Ian Leet (482-6612) or ian.leet@outlook.com. Or signup on the sheets in the lobby.

On December 16th, (Friday evening), we will finish decorating the interior of the sanctuary with wreaths and laurel. We are especially looking for families to participate in this, so there will be a light supper at 5:30. There'll be activities for children, and a short Worship for Children service after the decoration is completed. All will be over by 7:30. We will need many volunteers to get everything done on time. Contact Ian or sign up in the lobby.

Children and Hanging of the Greens

Children, parents and grandparents: We need your help with ***Hanging of the Greens*** on Friday, December 16. We'll begin with a light supper at 5:30 p.m. No need for you to bring anything; we'll pass the basket to help defray expenses. But do let us know if you are intending to come so we can plan appropriately. There is a sign-up sheet on the table in the lobby. Or you can call or email the church. After supper we will gather for a brief worship service where Sara Bonam Welge will lead us in one of the children and worship stories. Then adults and older children can decorate the sanctuary while the younger children will make Chrismons (Christmas ornaments with Christian symbols on them.) We'll have all the materials and supplies, but we need some extra hands. If you can help, please let us know.

Christmas Offering

The Board of Deacons has designated the 2016 Christmas offering for two ministries:

- **Mission in Romania**

Maggie (Busman) and Jason White are now Resident Care Youth Assistants at a residence youth home in Romania. Lydia House and Dorcas House are ministries working with abandoned and socially disadvantaged children. Most of these children and youth are orphaned, abandoned, or from very troubled family situations. Jason and Maggie will be working with others in providing a loving and guiding environment to help children learn life skills and become prepared for independent living.

- **Emergency Overflow Shelter**

For the past several years members of First Church have been preparing and delivering meals for the men at the Emergency Overflow Shelter. This grassroots effort started 15 years ago by the Protestant Evangelical Church and First Lutheran Church in collaboration with the Capital Area Council of Churches.

This is truly a community resource- it could not operate without those who share their time and money so that the neediest among us have a place of hope. Last year the shelter was able to remain open until late April and provided more than 3100 bed nights and hot meals. The shelter also helps connect guests with permanent housing and assists them in searching for employment.

Post-Service Hospitality

And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.” Acts 16:34

Please consider providing refreshments and hosting our post-service fellowship time by signing up for a couple of Sundays during the year. Coffee and tea will be set up ahead of time but we need people to bring some cookies or other treats and to help serve. Elders, deacons and trustees take care of the refreshments on first three Sundays of each month but we need volunteers to host on the 4th and 5th Sundays of each month. A sign-up sheet is in the lobby.

Special prelude music each Sunday in Advent

November 27 Schubler Chorales of Johann Sebastian Bach
December 4 Peter Subers, baritone
December 11 David Bon-Keen, bassoon
December 17 Rose Hunsberger, soprano

"Wherever You Go" Children & Worship



After the children's message on Consecration Sunday, guest preacher Kent Busman sent them off with the words, "Okay, you can go wherever it is you go now." We all smiled. Kent honestly didn't know where the children were going, but I couldn't help but think that he's not the only one who doesn't know what's in store for First Church children each Sunday when they're dismissed. Where DO they go?

They go to a special place called the Worship Center, where they hear that "this is a special place to be with God: to talk to God, to listen to God, and to hear the stories of God." The Worship Center isn't Sunday School. It's not pedagogical, it's liturgical. The focus isn't child care, but child core. It's age-appropriate worship that teaches children to wonder in the presence of God.

Just as the rest of us have come to rely on a rhythm of worship that moves from the Approach to God, the Word of God, and the Response to God, our children experience that same progression. They greet one another in the name of God, they sing, they listen to one of God's stories through the use of simple wooden figures or two-dimensional cut-outs, and they respond to the story in ways that are unique to their understanding and experience. They receive and sing a blessing before returning to the daily routines of their lives: "Go now in peace. May the love of God surround you everywhere you may go."

Those of us who are trained to lead the Children and Worship program are blessed by the experience as much as we believe the children themselves are blessed. This wonderful ministry is available to children ages 4 - 12; if you would like to learn more about it, please speak to Pastor Sue.

Church Library

I am in the process of trying to set up and organize a library for First Church. I do believe this would be a wonderful addition to our church. What I need right now are some volunteers who would be willing to give me an hour or so of your time to help me get the books organized and on the shelves.

If you feel called to serve in this project and help me, please call me at [518-463-2547](tel:518-463-2547) or email me at mew@nycap.rr.com or you may speak to me at church.

Your help will be very much appreciated. Yours in Christ, Mary Weijola

Weathervanes –

Holiday Dinner & Christmas Party at Lunchtime



Join the Weathervanes on Wednesday, December 7th, at 12:30 p.m. for our Holiday Dinner Party at lunchtime in Zimmerman Hall for a Roast Turkey dinner with singing and stories. The cost is \$15.00 per person. A contribution of \$5.00 or more toward the purchase of books as Christmas gifts for the children of our Food Pantry clients, would be appreciated. Please make your reservations with Audrey Ming (456-5485) by November 27th.

No December Meeting for First Church Readers Group



There is no December meeting but we will meet in January when we will be discussing: *Girl Waits with Gun* (A Kopp Sisters Novel) by Amy Stewart

February's Book is:
The Invention of Wings by Sue Monk Kid

Christmas Shoppe

Each year through the ministry of the First Church Food Pantry we help parents provide Christmas gifts for their children. The Christmas Shoppe will be held on Thursday morning, December 15, from 9:00 to 11:30 a.m. in Zimmerman Hall. Volunteers are welcome to help set up Monday, December 12. Donations of new and gently-used toys, puzzles, games, books and children's clothing will be received until Monday, December 12th. Volunteers needed. For more information, or to volunteer, contact Lorraine Houk at the church (463-4449).

Mitten Box for Christmas Shoppe

The Giving Box: Located in the Lounge
Mittens, gloves, hats and scarves (children & adult sizes)
Needed for the Christmas Shoppe on Thursday, December 15 from 9 to 11:30 a.m

Our next Homeless Shelter Dinner is December 9th.

The theme is “Chili” and there’s a sign-up sheet is on the hospitality table. Bring your dishes (in disposable containers) to the church on Sunday or any day between 9 and 1. (Call ahead to make sure someone is in the office to take your dishes.) If your dish contains pork or pork products please note that on the container.

Overflow Shelter Dinner Deliverers Needed. Our overflow Shelter Dinner Schedule is set. Can you deliver a meal to the shelter on Friday afternoon or evening? Sign up at the hospitality table or call or email Mary Bon (463-4449) December 9th ; January 13th ; February 3rd ; February 24th; March 17th. Questions? Call or email Mary Bon (463-4449) or maryebon@verizon.net. – and THANKS!

Christmas Eve Worship



6:30 pm	Pre-service Music (choir, organ and strings)
7:00 pm	Candlelight Service
8:15 pm	Wassail Hour

“Ring Them Bells” At Worship on January 1st The Sunday after Christmas

Come join us on January 1st as we ring in the new year with the joyful sound of bells. Ringing and singing with young and old, strangers and friends is fun. Bring your own bell or use one of ours. We’ll have lots of extra bells available. “Ring Them Bells”

Reminders from the Financial Secretary

- Remember to complete your Offering Pledge for 2016 if not already fulfilled
- All 2016 contributions must be received by Sunday, January 8th, 2017
- These contributions must be dated 2016
- After January 8th, 2017, all contributions will be posted to 2017 regardless of the date on your check.

If you have any questions regarding this note or for any matters concerning your donations, please contact me atwsivaslian@nycap.rr.com or 518-495-6353.

Thank you.
Wayne Sivaslian, Financial Secretary

Advent Activity Suggestion: Reverse Advent Calendar



Does your family do an Advent Calendar every year? Are you looking for a new way to do that? Try doing a Reverse Advent Calendar this year. Instead of *getting* something everyday to make the waiting sweeter, how about *giving* something everyday to make someone's new year sweeter?

Here's how it works:

Start on December 1 with an empty laundry basket. Over the course of the month, add a household item to that basket each day. At the end of the month, donate the basket(s) to the First Church Food Pantry.

One example of how you could do this:

- December 1-7: Deodorant, Shampoo
- December 8-14: Canned Fruit, Soup
- December 15-21: Toilet paper, Soap
- December 22-31: Feminine Products, Razors

Hamilton!

The world is abuzz about the musical about Alexander Hamilton who has a connection with Albany and First Church. He married Elizabeth Schuyler, daughter of Philip Schuyler, at the Schuyler Mansion. She was baptized at the Stone Church. WMHT is producing a special called "**Hamilton's Albany**" which will air on channel 17 on Sunday, December 4th with repeats later in the week. We will be giving tours on December 10th (after the decorating) for interested public. For more information, visit <http://www.wmht.org/hamiltonsalbany/>.

How to Get in Touch with Valerie Williams

Valerie began her work at First Church in September working alongside Denise. She has now quite handily taken on her responsibilities at First Church. Please continue to welcome her to the First Church community.

You may reach Valerie at the Church office at 463-4449 or via email: vwilliams@firstchurchinalbany.org. Her hours are Monday through Friday: 8 am to 3 pm

Rev. Cameron Monthly Brunch

Rev. Bill Cameron began gathering a group for lunch on the first Thursday of the month. The group continues to meet each month at the Gateway Diner, 899 Central Ave. in Albany. Anyone can join us starting at 12:15 and stay until you wish to leave. We all pay for our own. Contact Donna E. Schultz at deschultz07@aol.com or 518.429.1255.

Christmas Poinsettia Memorials

Please send a note or call the church office (463.4449) by Monday, December 5th to place your order for Christmas Poinsettia memorials. A minimum donation of \$10 per plant is requested. Make your check payable to First Church in Albany (marked: Poinsettias). After Christmas, the plants are shared with our homebound members and friends.

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The deadline for the January issue of *FAMILY* is December 15.

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Memorial

In honor of the service Denise Lobdell provided to First Church in Albany, Jim and Jean Burns made a donation to the Lynn T. Joosten Education Fund.

In memory of **Rev. Wil Ivins** a gift has been received from Elizabeth M. Pierce for the Lynn T. Joosten Education Fund.

In memory of **Viola Baker** a gift has been received from Cindy Gillespie for the Food Pantry.

In memory of **Benjamin Schoedel** a gift has been received from Shirley Bone for the Clee Park Fund.

In celebration of the life of **Rev. Wil Ivins** a gift has been received from Cheryl Gowie for the Music Fund.

In celebration of the life of **Paul F. Pagerey** a gift has been received from Cheryl Gowie for the Music Fund.

In Sympathy

Sympathy is extended to the family and friends of Viola Baker who passed away on October 29, 2016.



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