

FAITH FIRST

Following CHRIST Through the Seasons



HOPE Fulfilled



The Lamb

*Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life, and bid thee feed
By the stream and o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, wooly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?
Little Lamb, who made thee?*

*Little Lamb, I'll tell thee
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee:
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb,
He is meek, and he is mild;
He became a little child.
We are called by his name.*

*Little Lamb, God bless thee!
Little Lamb, God bless thee!*

William Blake
(1757-1827)



Adoration of the Lamb, Jan van Eyck

Cover print:
First Presbyterian Sanctuary Stained Glass
Photo by Gerry Leslie

THE SEASONS: THE RHYTHMS OF LIFE

BY JOHN MUSGRAVE

The seasons of the church create eternal rhythms of spiritual formation. Holy days and seasons create sacred space in the cycle of the year that teach and deepen faith. The seasons of the church year tell the story of the life of Christ and God's redemptive work in the world. In the timeless stories of faith we discover our story. Our lives find meaning and hope experiencing again eternity breaking into our lives through God's love.

The Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany Season is a movement from darkness to light, despair to hope, and expectancy to reality. It is the story that out of love God chooses to enter the darkened world as a

vulnerable infant that brings the light that fills the whole world with love and peace.

Advent begins with a yearning for God. If you have ever had an obscure intuition that the truth of things is somehow better, greater, more wonderful than you deserve and that there is a mercy beyond anything you could ever suspect, you have already been drawn into the mystery of Advent. When we yearn, we acknowledge that the world and we are not how we should be. Yet, we realize by ourselves we can not be transformed. Advent is the expectancy that God will act. God will bring justice, mercy, and love. God will bring the light.

For us to claim Advent there are

some disciplines of expectancy:

- Meditation on scripture. Use our Advent Meditations Book and/or read Isaiah 40-66. Reflect on the messages and yearn for God to come to you.
- Worship. Advent begins on November 29th. Sunday worship will follow the lectionary readings calling

us to expect God's love to change us. Wednesday Evenings in Advent will be contemplative, filled with the yearning of Advent. Attend the Feast of Carols, December 13th. In your private devotions listen to Handel's Messiah.

- Compassion to the poor. This can help us refocus on the values of the coming Kingdom of God. Serve at the Neighborhood Breakfast or volunteer at the Holiday Dinner. Work at Crossover, Carriage Town, Salem Housing, or the Food Bank. Share with those in need.

Christmas and Epiphany celebrates "the Word became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14). God has not forsaken us. God has this magnificent obsession. God keeps coming to us even when we have turned to evil. The marvel is that the creator of the cosmos comes as creature for the purpose of setting right all that has gone wrong on this tiny planet. Just as the first words of creation were "let there be light" Jesus comes as the light of the new creation. At the darkest time of

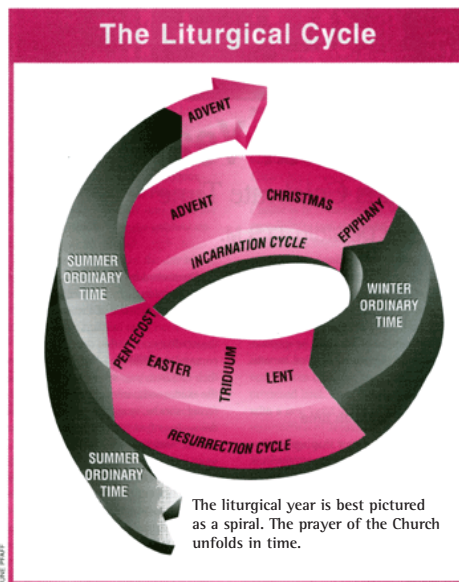
the year, we are reminded of God's pure light.

For us to claim Christmas and Epiphany there are some disciplines of illumination:

- Hospitality. Opening the light and warmth of our homes to others helps remind us that Jesus and his parents were dependent on the hospitality of others in Bethlehem and Egypt.
- Friendship. During the winter months people can experience loneliness. Bring light into their darkness with friendship.
- The great exchange. God exchanges our humanity with divinity, our death with life, and darkness with light. Exchange cards and gifts with the expression of love and light.
- Evangelism. Share the light of Christ with others. Put Christ at the center of Christmas.

Yearn for the coming of Christ into your heart and lives. Celebrate that the Light has dawned.

May the hope of Advent, the love of Christmas, and the light of Epiphany bless you.



Dr. John L. Musgrave is Senior Pastor at First Presbyterian Church.

A PICTURE OF HOPE

BY PAUL YTTEROCK

It's not that Rita Langworthy doesn't think about having a beautiful home and going on trips and vacations like many of her friends, taking in some of the other niceties she could enjoy especially now that she is retired. "There are days when just for a split second I think . . . I mean I am a Medicare, card-carrying senior citizen! I should not be talking about first graders and kindergarteners! [My lady friends] all have their beautiful homes. And my home . . . dinner for four is ground into the rug!"

It's not that Rita doesn't think about how her strict upbringing in an "extremely fundamentalist church" in Findlay, Ohio, in a family of "rescuers" has shaped her thoughts and actions and continues to give her direction and a framework for understanding the fragility of relationships. "I grew up with rescuers . . . birds, cats, dogs, kids . . . [a family] who thought it was going to be forever, and it never was."

It's not that Rita hasn't put in her time, working hard over the years as a teacher seeking out the slower-learning youth and adults, and as a school administrator in the rowdy and tough urban hallways of Flint schools. "I've always gravitated towards the needy, even in education . . . don't stick me with suburban kids, let me teach in the 'hood and when I get there let me teach the toughest of the tough, the lowest of the low, those are the ones I like."

It's not that Rita is immune from tragedy and grief; she lives with her share. "My son-in-law was not supposed to die suddenly of a brain aneurism and leave my daughter a widow at 30." And the agonizingly slow death of her husband suffering with Alzheimer's . . . there were times when Rita's faith was nearly

shattered as she wrestled with God, questioned God's care, doubted God's love. A time when she threw all her Bibles in the trash wondering what's the use, attending church all the while and hearing the Gospel—the Good News—but saying, "I wish what they were saying applied to me."

It's not that Rita, well . . . what it is, is about, in Rita's words, "doing what you can while you can." Doing what you can while you can. It's not that Rita is unlike any of the rest of us with the twists and turns of her own unique story; laced with glory and obscurity, with joy and sorrow, with surety and doubt. Rita Langworthy's story is rooted in God . . . and lived out in the assurance of hope grounded in God's grace. "Out of my gratitude for what grace did for me, how could I have a sense of hopelessness for anyone else?" Rita, trusting in God first, follows God's lead so that she might do what she can while she can.

And so what is Rita doing?

Rita Langworthy lives in a house with two other adults and six children, none of them blood relatives, but all of them family . . . a son, a daughter, and six grandchildren.

When taking on the role of School Administrator at Bunche Elementary School (MLK Ave just south of Stewart Ave) a young man, named General, came to Rita with a couple of friends wanting to work with the boys in the school. General had some serious baggage as he had been raised by the worst drug lord in Flint and had never even started the 9th grade. While the rest of his kin was still out there in the streets General had been miraculously delivered from that and now had a ministry to youth. Rita met this

young man and found him to be a huge help to her as he gave her an education on the kids and the city and the ways of the streets. "He was so good with the kids," says Rita. "He understood them and they respected him."

But educating Rita wasn't confined only to city kids and urban schools; wasn't confined to only learning the values, the manners, the hidden rules, the language and thinking of this culture so different from what Rita knew. This was the time in life during which Rita was filled with doubts and fears about God, the time she had thrown all her Bibles out thinking them useless. It was then, at this time that General came to her house on Mother's Day, sat down in a chair in her home and convinced Rita that God did indeed love her. This young man—doing what he could while he was able—held Rita up and encouraged her, mentored her, and opened himself to God's healing Spirit so that through him God ministered to Rita who longed to be reconciled, to be made whole during her "season of night."

"I suppose it was hope that made me rescue my Bibles from the trash and put them in storage instead. Hope that someday my inner emptiness would dissipate. My hope was fulfilled by a young man who made it his project to convince me that I was still loved by God and to lead me into a renewed relationship."

Through this God carried Rita to the dawn of a new season. But as Rita knew, life can deal unexpected blows, and it was then General who was to be dealt a series of "knock-out blows" that sent him back to the streets. Now it was Rita's turn. Open to God's lead she did what she could while she was able, and

through her God ministered to General who longed to be reconciled, to be made whole during his season of night. Rita reached out to him and encouraged him, mentored him, and even brought him in off the streets—just for a night. That was 10 years ago!

“I suppose it was hope that made me go after that young man when he returned to the ‘streets’ after a series of devastating circumstances. I couldn’t stop believing that he could be restored and again be of great service to God.”

There, right there in that union . . . two unlikely sorts being brought together . . . not choreographed and polished like a made-for-TV-movie, but both, in all their brokenness, open to God’s promptings, open to being there for one another . . . to uphold and encourage, to care for and nurture . . . to laugh with and cry with and love one another. Their brokenness was not the end of the story. Something like divine hope allowed them to be conduits through which God raised the other up—and continues to raise one another up—to being shaped and molded into the image Christ.

“If it weren’t for General I don’t know where I’d be today. He says the same about me, if it weren’t for me he would be dead or in jail because I was the only one who stuck with him when he went back to the streets. And I don’t know how or why . . . he latched on to me as a mom and I latched on to him as a son. There’s this bond that this middle-aged white woman with a Master’s Degree has with this African American, high school drop-out . . . and it just can’t be explained.”

Doing what you can while you can. It is hope put into action, a practice of living hope . . . acting in ways that hold on to the truth that in Christ, through Christ, destructive cycles can be broken; acting in ways that show and tell our neigh-

bor the Good News that in Christ, through Christ, God is at work in our world, yes, in our lives, reconciling, bringing healing and leading us to wholeness; acting out of the assurance that in Christ, through Christ, God directs and uses even one such as me—with all my failings, in all my brokenness—to touch a hurting soul with the world-changing, life-giving love of God.

Hope then, is centered in God’s faithfulness come to us in Jesus the Christ, not in our abilities or our need to “secure” the future. Rita’s hope is rooted in this. When she asks herself, “What will happen next with my life and my wonderful family?” She answers: “I have not the slightest idea.” And goes on to quote the old gospel song of her childhood, “Many things about tomorrow I don’t seem to understand; But I know who holds tomorrow, and I know He holds our hands.”

“I suppose it is hope that rebukes those who say sharing a home and a life with 2 adults and 6 young children is too difficult. Common sense says I am too old and tired and should give up. But uncommon sense—hope—whispers, ‘Not yet.’

Says Rita, “I am encouraged by the words of Oswald Chambers: ‘Our Lord never put His trust in any person. Yet He was never suspicious, never bitter, and never lost hope for anyone, because He put His trust in God first. He trusted absolutely in what God’s grace could do for others.’

“Perhaps, then, it isn’t as much about hope as it is grace. Perhaps a soul that is filled with hope has had a close call with ‘death,’ only to experience God’s grace. Out of my gratitude for what grace did for me, how could I have a sense of hope-



L-R Front row: General holding James, Chasity holding Blessing, Christian, Calista (frequent guest), Alyssa holding Angelisha, and Christina. Back row: Atia (frequent guest) and Rita

lessness for anyone else?”

Hope. Grace. Maybe at this particular time of year we can see most clearly the meeting of the two, hope and grace. Hope: our human longing, desiring *something*, for *someone* to give us purpose, direction, to fill the inner emptiness of our fallen condition, to reconcile us . . . with God, with others, with all creation, with even ourselves . . . and lead us to wholeness. Grace: hope captured by that for which it so longs, hope fulfilled not by our beliefs or our actions, but by God’s belief, God’s act of coming to us in all our broken, longing state and lovingly holding us in His hands . . . even before we knew it, even before we knew to yearn for His touch, even as we held Him lovingly in our arms on that stable night . . . grace meets hope with the gift of life.



Paul Ytterock is the Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian Church.

THE SOURCE OF OUR HOPE

BY JERRY D. WALDEN

As the Boeing 737 circled the night sky, the lights of the city of Atlanta sparked like diamonds across the landscape. Approximately 5.5 million people went about their daily lives, laughing, loving and enjoying the peace and tranquility the city has to offer. How different that picture than in October 1864. After 36 days of bombing, General Sherman and the Union troop marched into the city were they found only two groups of people—those who were too wounded to move and those who were too poor to get out. There were many factors that went into the rebuilding of the modern Atlanta of today and hope was certainly one of them. There was a point at which people looked not at what was but at what could be and hope was born.

We know that hope is important to anyone facing a serious situation. One of the marks of depression is a loss of hope. Hopeless people are not motivated to change. Without hope people stay stuck in horrendous conditions. With hope people move forward, they accomplish much. With hope people are able to build a great city from the burned ashes of war and destruction. Yet it is critical to identify the source of our hope.

In the seventh chapter of Luke's gospel we are given the story of a man looking for hope. A Centurion, a military man, had a servant who was dying. Although a great leader with much authority

and power, he was helpless to bring about change in the servant's condition. He needed help because within his own power he was helpless and hopeless. It is interesting to note that he had three qualities that many people rest on for hope. First, he was a man of position. In verse 8 he says "For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes." Second, he was a man of benevolence and compassion. We know this because the Jewish leaders reminded Jesus saying, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation." And third, he was philanthropic in his actions as noted in their statement "and has built our synagogue." There are times when we look to ourselves for our hope; we look to our position, our

"There was a point at which people looked not at what was but at what could be and hope was born."

compassion or our own goodness as the source of our hope. Although none of these are in and

of themselves negative, we must recognize that their will be times when all our efforts will not be sufficient for the task.

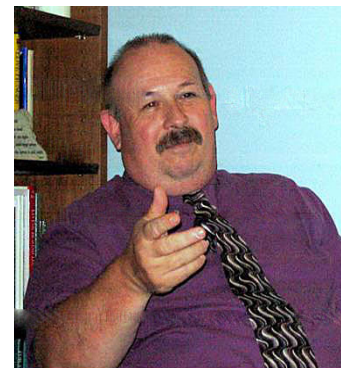
The Centurion looked to none of these for hope; rather he looked outside of himself to Jesus. He said, "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not

even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed."

The Jewish leaders appealed to his goodness and efforts, but he recognized that the source of his hope was not within himself. If he could have accomplished what needed to be done, the servant would already have been healed. Rather, in humility he approached the only source of hope available to him. How often do we appeal to God, not in humility, but looking at what we have done, at our efforts and accomplishments? The Centurion is a wonderful example of the true holiday spirit when we look to God for our hope.

As we enter this season of Christmas, let us remember that the true source of our hope is not found within us, but within the one for whom we celebrate this season. Christ our Hope.

"Without hope people stay stuck in horrendous conditions. With hope people move forward, they accomplish much."



Jerry Walden is a counselor in the Gerholz Counseling Center

IS ANYTHING TOO WONDERFUL FOR OUR GOD?

BY MARK RIDDLES

What has God promised you? How would you know? What do you sense as the unfulfilled promises in your life? What is the thing for which you ache desperately? What is it that you desire with a longing intense and immutable, a longing from so deep within the abyss of your heart that only God could have placed it there?

God had promised that Sarah's offspring would number as the stars in the sky. Childless at 90, she does not deserve to be made fun of, and when she thinks she is, does not receive it kindly.

Sarah had lived a life of faithfulness and obedience to God. She bravely shared the danger of her husband's wanderings at the leading of God. Sarah had known the humiliation of being offered by her husband to another man; she had endured the heartbreak and self-doubt of barrenness. She had survived the agony of consenting as her husband fathered sons (perhaps her promised ones) by another woman. She had struggled with seething resentment at having to compete with this woman for the affections of the husband for whom she had endured and sacrificed so much.

And now God dares to say, "Sarah will conceive a son."

Surely, this perceived mockery stirred stormy emotions in Sarah. Surely, she tasted again the bitterness of the unfulfilled promise of her youth. She must have felt ridiculed as she remembered the comely appearance that had once been hers—beauty that

fetches the fervid looks of a foreign king. And now see what 90 years had made of her smooth skin, firm breasts and rounded hips.

Sarah was overcome with the absurdity and the cruelty of this promise renewed. And so twisting her skin in a toothless old grin, she laughs in the face of God.

"Why do you laugh?" God asks.

"Is anything too wonderful for your God?"

God fulfills the promise. Abraham and Sarah renew their intimacy and from their shared seed a child is born who is named Isaac, from whom shall come Jacob, from whom shall come the house of Israel. Sarah's offspring do, after all, number as the stars in the sky, even the star of Bethlehem.

God fulfills the promise and the sarcastic cackling of an anguished old woman is transformed into the light-hearted laughter of a mother suckling her child.

What are the unfulfilled promises in your

life?

What has God promised you? How would you know?

In this season, it is important to find time to listen; to listen to that for which you ache desperately; to that which you desire with a longing so intense and from so deep within the abyss of your heart that only God could have placed it there.

It is important, too, to identify that bruised skepticism or smoldering resentment that stalks your faith in the fulfillment of the promise. What specter lurks in your shadow and

whispers again and again the question of evil or the sting of old hurts or the despair of broken dreams?

Why do you laugh?

God has promised to enter our lives and there to make our crooked straight, our rough places plain, what is lame in us to leap, what is blind in us to see, what is deaf in us to hear.

Why do we laugh?

God has promised to enter our lives and there to make the lion to lay down with the lamb; the angry to be at peace, and the anguished to be comforted.

Why do we laugh?

God has promised to enter our lives and there to be help where we are helpless and where we are hopeless to plant the seed of hope.

Why do we laugh?

Is anything too wonderful for our God?



Mark Riddles is Director of the Music and Fine Arts at First Presbyterian Church.

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EVENTS 2009-10

Sunday Advent Services

Sunday, November 29-Sunday, December 20
9:30am in the Sanctuary

Wednesday Advent Services

Wednesday, December 2-Wednesday, December 23
6:30pm in the Chapel

Women's Christmas Luncheon

Saturday, December 5
11:00am-1:00pm in the Narthex

Feast of Carols

Sunday, December 13
4:00pm in the Sanctuary

Neighborhood Christmas Dinner

Tuesday, December 15
4:00-6:00pm in the Parish Hall

Christmas Eve Services

Thursday, December 24
Children's Service - 5:00pm
Lessons and Carols/Communion Services - 9:00 & 11:00pm
In the Sanctuary

New Year's Eve Service

Thursday, December 31
6:30pm in the Chapel

Epiphany

Sunday, January 3
9:30am in the Sanctuary

Baptism of the Lord

Sunday, January 10
9:30am in the Sanctuary

Senior Pastor
John L. Musgrave

Associate Pastor
Paul Ytterock

Commissioned Lay Pastor
Steve Baillie

Director of Business Administration
Jim Hujan

Director of Children's Ministry
Jaime Powell

Director of Gerholz Counseling Center
Andy Armstrong

Director of Music and Fine Arts
Mark Riddles

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