

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Stockbridge, Massachusetts

January 2020 Newsletter

Dear Friends in Christ,

As the lights of Christmas fade and give way to the light of that star of Epiphany we turn from birth and new beginnings to journeys and following *The Way*. In Epiphany we consider the moments when those around Jesus came to understand who he was and why he matters. Starting with the magi journeying from afar, to the baptism and the voice from heaven claiming him as beloved, to stories of water changing into wine, the blind seeing, and life bursting forth Epiphany brings us along for us to come and see.

It is tempting to see each as “aha” moments of transformation, yet the Bible more often paints a picture of people gradually understanding and then following. In the time of Jesus people clamored for yet one more sign, one more miracle that they might believe, yet Jesus knew that faith is a constant work in progress, a slow and gradual turning of the heart. So, he showed them the way and set them off in the right direction. In the time of Jonathan Edwards, people clamored to the Great Awakening revivals where the emotion of the moment led to conversions to faith, yet Edwards knew that when the lights faded often so did those conversions. So he committed himself to nurturing new-found until it found the way and followed.

In our time, our tradition emphasizes the “how” of belief even more than the “what.” We remember that it is an ongoing daily process of setting out in the direction of light and truth until it becomes part of who we are. Henry David Thoreau captured that truth when he wrote “As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.”

Each day is a new opportunity for us to put us in the right position to continue in that process. How do you start your day?

A few weeks ago, Jon made me aware of how I start my day and how it wasn’t putting me in the right position and so I have begun to change.

I used to listen to Morning Edition on NPR. While there were always stories of interest and truth, there also was the conflict, controversy and the scandal of our time baked in. My act of preparation for the day loaded me down with all that baggage and risked directing me to a different path than the one Jesus invites us to follow. I am now trying out some different podcasts. I love *On Being* with Krista Tippett and her conversations with people of faith. When I have less time, I have discovered the compelling inter-faith stories of the BBC’s *Heart and Soul*. Jon is urging me to listen to the Ezra Klein podcasts for thoughtful exploration of topics that matter.



I Have learned that when I start my day immersed in honest, thoughtful, and hopeful perspectives I find myself making that path Thoreau wrote about, seeing that light the Magi followed, and more intentionally looking for that path Jesus has already deeply made.

As we turn to Epiphany, how are you starting your day? Are you putting yourself in position to set out like the Magi knowing that you too might come home by a different road? Are you searching for the deep path of meaning Christ followed knowing where they lead; to the costs and joys of discipleship? If so, I would love to hear more. If not, what changes could you make?

Peace in this new year and this new journey,

Brent

OUR SHARED LIFE TOGETHER

HAPPY JANUARY BIRTHDAYS
(Please let someone on Growth and Fellowship know if we have not included your birthday or listed it incorrectly.)

January 4 Lisa Nelson
January 5 John Morse
January 7 Jane McCormick
January 12 Anne Roy
 Mary Jane Dunlop
January 13 Jeannene Booher
January 14 Jill Wheat

January 16 Nancy Wilcox
January 21 Alexis Kennedy
January 22 Pat Carlson
 Daniel Knauss
January 23 Christine Smith
January 26 Ann Underwood
 Willa Pohl
 Kenneth LaBresh
January 27 Linda Colvin
January 28 Chuck Gillett
January 29 Vivian Wise
January 31 Cathy Clark

PLEASE REMEMBER THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR PRAYERS:

Pat Nowak, Derrick Nowak, the Wheat Family, Russ Fadding, Cindy Ogulnick, Sibylle Baier, Diane Vogt, Gary and Corinne Burke, Mary Jane Dunlop, Nell Ezequelle, Stan Osak, Jr., Philip Connor, Ronnie Cunningham's son Colin, Gigi Kingston, Barbara Bracknell, Meryle Epstein, Lindsay Hermanski, Jeannie Smith, Natalie Newberg, Arthur Dutil, and Jeanne Fleming.

NEWS FROM AROUND THE CHURCH

REPORTS FROM STAFF, BOARDS, COMMITTEES, AND SERVICE LEAGUE

Sexton News

- ◆ Proof that the cover of the dumpster should be kept closed: One day recently, Brent called me into the classroom. Out the window we could see a very large black bird hopping down into the open dumpster (I had taken one load of trash out, intending to take more). It turned out that two vultures were taking turns feasting on leftovers! After a brief standoff, I was able to shoo them away long enough to close the lid. They spent the rest of the day on the church chimney, hoping I would forget again.
- ◆ If you notice anything broken or needing attention in the church building, please don't hesitate to contact me in the office, 298-3137, or office@stockbridgeucc.org. A note on my desk works, too.



Will Garrison, Administrator and Sexton

First Congregational Church Scholarship

As noted in the December newsletter, the Service League asked the Board of Trustees to establish a permanent memorial scholarship account. In the past 34 years, the Scholarship Fund has grown, providing our college students with much needed support. This year's scholarships of \$1,000 were presented on December 22 to Fiona Brown, Forest Davis-Hollander, Logan Higuera, Ted Hornick, and Anna Grace Nimo.

Claire Williams

Finance News

Notes on Year-End Giving

We hope you will have completed your 2019 giving in December. However, if we receive any check dated in Dec., 2019, no later than Jan. 15 it can be included in your 2019 giving report, which you will receive by Jan. 30. The same dates apply for any 2020 pledges you wish to "prepay" in 2019.

2020 Pledges

If you have not yet turned in a 2020 pledge card, or sent an email to Will or Ron, please do that as soon as possible. It's even helpful to know if you decide not to pledge in 2020 even though you did in 2019. A pledge helps the church community in many ways. Still, mostly, we value YOU. A pledge is icing on your cake.

Giving Envelopes

Giving envelopes for 2020 will be available in the JE room by Sunday Dec., 22. If you used envelopes in 2019 you will automatically have envelopes for 2020 unless you let Ron know that you don't need them. If you have not used envelopes but would like to, please sign up on the clipboard next to the envelope boxes in the JE room. All will be on the table at the north end of the room.

Any questions? Contact me at rphanft@yahoo.com or 413-232-4179.

Ron Hanft, Financial Secretary

Youth Group Sees the Light

In December the Jr. Youth Group held its second event of the year. In November, we gathered over pizza, home-made cookies and games to get to know each other and to decide what we wanted to do for the year. Some of the ideas generated included:

- Service projects locally and beyond.
- Engagement on advocacy issues like climate change.
- Bible Study and learning about our church and faith.
- Social events and the chance to just get together.
- A team of three (Willa, Hannah and Andrew) volunteered to oversee our KIVA micro-loans.



On the 15th a group of twelve gathered in the JE Room with steaming hot chocolate in hand to talk about the significance of light in the Bible and at Christmas time. We read passages from the Creation story, to the Psalms and the Prophets and finally to those around Christmas and talked about light and how it helps ease fear and show the way. Then, we all went up to Naumkeag to walk the Winter Lights and take it all in. It was cold and fun!

We will take January off before getting together in February to take a look at the Bible and climate change and what we might want to do in response.



Mission & Action

Thanks to everyone who gave, organized, and delivered a wondrous pile of wrapped gifts for families - and pets!



The Service League

If you heard a collective sigh emanating from the JE Room recently, it was the members of the Service League, and their many helpers, as they put away the last traces of another successful Holly Fair. We netted about \$4500 and in spite of moments of near panic, had a lot of fun. We hope you did, too! We always say the same thing - "We couldn't do it without you". And this year it was more true than ever. There are many people to be thanked - those who helped with set up and take down, who baked, who worked on the day of the sale, and people who just showed up and said, "What can I do to help?" Here's a list, in no particular order, and we sincerely hope that no one has been left off it inadvertently: Will Garrison, Jon Geldert, Liz Murray, Susan Moor, Judy Culver, Jill Fleming, Gene Kalish (Santa!), Willa Pohl, Kara Smith, Christine Rasmussen, Jeannene Booher, Olga Schwede, Connie Montgomery, Sarah Boyd, Shirley Miller, Kay and Neil Holden, Stephanie and Carl Bradford, Cindy Brown, Ron Hanft, John and Marcie Miner, Diane Piraino and Ted Randolph, Linda Russell, Anna Smith, Jay and Terry Wise, Hope and John Hansen, Ruth Wheat (Santa's Helper!), Ken and Diane Fogarty, Charlotte Rodgers, Sophie Anderson, Steve and Nick Fadding, Don Rodgers, and Betsey McKearnan. I hope that's everyone!

Once again, many thanks. Your support means so much, and, in turn, helps us support the Church and its mission.

Merry Christmas!

Margaret Hornick, for the Service League



Guest Pastors for January 19 & 26

While Brent is away, we are blessed with wonderful worship leaders.

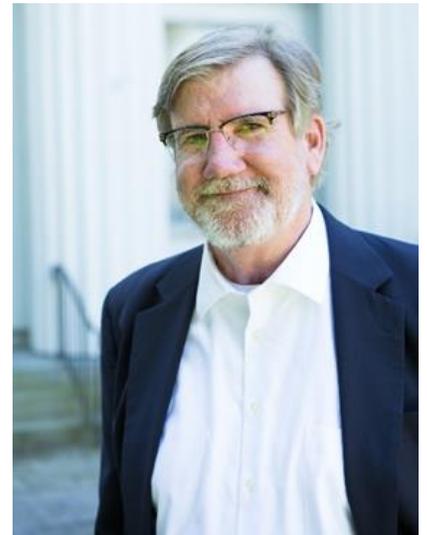


On January 19, the Rev. Adele Crawford returns to our church to lead worship. Adele, a friend and class-mate of Brent's at Yale Divinity School, brings together an amazing mix of a heart dedicated to God, a mind deeply versed in Bible and theology, preaching geared to our lives today, a singing voice that evokes the angels, and a presence imbued with love. Adele will be serving for a month during Brent's sabbatical, so this is a great time to get to know her a little bit better.

Then on January 26, our own Rev. Dr. Rick Floyd will once again bring his many gifts into worship. Rick is a writer of hymn texts, daily devotions and maintains a blog called "When I Survey" (which can be found at richardfloyd.com). Rick

brings decades of experience to preaching that always takes deeply the context of the reading, its history and theological foundations, as well as the conviction that the truths found in scripture and how we respond them fundamentally matter for our lives and world.

Thank you in advance to both of them for what they will share and the heart behind it all.



New Website Launched!

In November, our presence on the web received a significant upgrade both visually and functionally. Through beautiful photography and thoughtful layout, our new site helps to convey the life, beauty and love of our congregation. Critically, the site is also now mobile device friendly so that it scales to the device you are using.

We have designed new sections designed to help our visitors and guests feel more at home. Nice touches include quotes from congregants about their experience here, beautiful recordings of shared faith stories, and information geared to first-time visitors and/or families with children. Research indicates that many people explore a church on-line before visiting.

We have also significantly enhanced how the site can work for our current church family. The church event function has been enhanced to include details about the things happening at the church. If you missed a week or want to listen to a sermon again, there is a button on the front page of the site that lets you listen directly from there. The photo galleries have been improved and updated. The site also now includes the ability for us to pin high priority announcements (e.g., weather-related cancellations) to the top of the site.

We hope that you check out the site (stockbridgeucc.org), that you use it to get the information that you need, and that you share it with friends who might be looking for a place to call home. Special thanks to Jon Geldert for all of his work, Theory One Design for the design work, Square Candy for the programming, and the estate of Grace Johnson who funded our new online home.

Visit today! www.stockbridgeucc.org

Church to Close Christmas Day through New Year's Day

The Church Office and buildings will be closed for one week as staff are on much needed breaks. You may contact Brent on his cell phone (617-513-0185) with any emergencies.

WE WILL HAVE WORSHIP ON DEC 29 and AA/ALANON will still meet on Tuesday evening.

We will be setting the heat lower to save on costs during this time. If you absolutely need to be here, feel free to raise the heat but make sure to lower it and never use the Hold button on the thermostat. Will has made arrangements with his back-up sexton to take care of the cleaning of the church during this time. This will also include a thorough cleaning of the tile floors in the education wing on Monday December 30 and Tuesday December 31. Please avoid the wing on those days so he can get the floors cleaned and polished.



And in other news...

Jay and Terry Wise are the proud grandparents of Grant Elliott Shaw, son of Margot Wise and her husband Dan Shaw. Born December 8, 2019. Margot and family live in Holyoke.

Terry Wise's paintings are on display at Baba Louie's restaurant, 42 Railroad Street in Great Barrington, now through March. Stop in for a peek and/or a pizza.

Matthew Studies Wrap Up

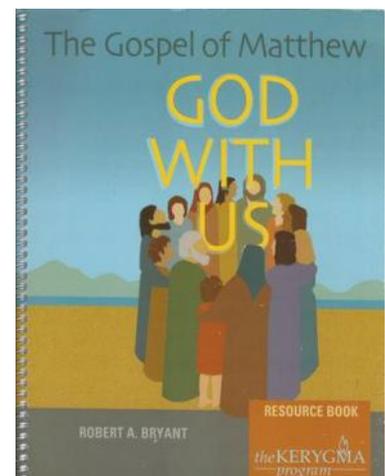
This fall two different groups worked through a fourteen section study on the Gospel of Matthew. We studied Matthew this fall as starting in Advent, Matthew will be the Gospel the Lectionary supplies for worship most often for the coming year.

We started by studying the context of the religious environment of Matthew's time as well as the political dimensions to better understand the issues at hand. The curriculum kept challenging us to focus on Matthew's claims about Jesus and letting them stand alone rather than blending in the insights of Mark, Luke or John. It also drew our attention to those places where Matthew included something not included in any of the other Gospels and asking us to consider why and to what end. Matthew's Gospel can be challenging and yet staying within his framework and perspective we were able to gain new insights and see truth even in some of the most difficult or vexing passages. Many people in the study commented on they noticed things in the Gospel they had never seen before. Some went so far to say that Matthew had become their favorite Gospel. Even more importantly one person even said that through this study they felt like they really met Jesus for the first time.

Each section ended with a celebration including a grand feast for the evening group. While people were deeply grateful for their better understand of this gospel, everyone talked about the joy of being together and exploring these texts in supporting and deep ways. Talk to someone from the class to find out more so that the next time a study starts you might step forward and say me too!

Monday Afternoon Section: Cathy Clark, Meryl Epstein, Linda Hoddy, Donna Jacobs, JoAnn Levitt, Cris Raymond, and John Ruffing

Wednesday Evening Section: Cindy Brown, Vicky Cooper, Ron Hanft, Mary Hoetzel, Susan Moor, Jeremy Ridenour, and Elizabeth Young





December 15th—Christingle and Advent Party
Clockwise from upper left: Children’s message based on the emoji, Jake with finished product, William distributing part of the Christingle during worship, the Hall family at the Advent Party, and Betsy showing Advent spirit.





Holly Fair: Cindy, Pat, and Sara serve delicious food, Jane watches over the lovely antique glass. The kids got their own room for Christmas shopping.

Greenery - inside and out.

Jo Ann shares her "faith story" about peace, during worship.