



the
MESSENGERbell
December 2020

PREPARING FOR A COVID CHRISTMAS: AN INVITATION TO MEANDER

Every year, I plan and lead our Blue Christmas worship. It is a service that I love. I am committed to offering for anyone who may be in need of it because the holiday season is not the most joyful time of the year for many of us. Instead it is a reminder of what we have lost or have had to do without. For some, the holiday season may be the most sad and lonely time of the year. I believe there is room for those feelings. They should be honored and given space.

This year, I suspect that more than the usual number of people will struggle with what the holiday season looks and feels like. This global pandemic has altered our lives drastically, so many lives have been taken, and we have had to reckon with the loss of a sense of familiarity, closeness, certainty, togetherness, and more. All of these are the things we typically plan and hope to experience at the holidays: familiar traditions and rituals, togetherness with loved ones, friends, family—and chosen family, hugs, and huddling together to eat, sing, or pray, all together at (insert your designated person here)'s house.

We all have to rethink what the holidays will look like for us and who we will be able to see and when, all while weighing the risks for ourselves and those we love. These will be difficult decisions to make and conversations to have with loved ones.

It is for these reasons that I have found myself looking for the silver linings, the small joys, and God at work more than ever. Having done this, I can't help but see the potential for how this year, this season, might contain some wonderful possibilities. We can grant ourselves permission to do less, to be OK with less than perfection, to not feel the need to please everyone, to not succumb to the pressures this time of year can often have. With a little more time and space, I wonder what it would be like for you to *not* find ways and things to fill that space with, but rather to keep an openness to how the Spirit might be at work in those spaces.

Here it is: your invitation, I cordially invite you to meander through the holiday season. Not wander, not march, not sprint. Meander. This is by no means an aimless journey, but it is also not a regimented, scheduled itinerary to be completed to the letter. To meander offers a sense of peacefulness, a gentle journey, following a course while remaining open to all that you might encounter and experience.

There will be much happening, many opportunities to connect and engage in the life of our church, during the Advent and Christmas seasons. These are not

meant to fill any and all extra time and space you have, but we hope they are opportunities to help you meander through the season with intentionality. Planning events and creating activities will never replace what we will miss or heal the hurt we may experience. Just know that you are not alone.

You are in my thoughts and prayers as we enter into this season, holding in tension our sorrows and our silver linings. Let us do so with intentionality, grace, and a meandering spirit so that we may leave space for the Spirit to work and remain open to see God at work.

May God's Hope, Peace, Joy & Love surround you,
Alicia Reese

moving from

WORDS TO WITNESS IN OUR
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

moving from

INDIVIDUALISM TO INTIMATE
FELLOWSHIP IN OUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH OTHER MEMBERS OF THE
CHURCH COMMUNITY.

moving from

CHARITY TO CHANGING
STRUCTURES IN OUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH THE WORLD.

There are some wonderful ways to be in community with one another this holiday season: Advent Daily Devotionals (p. 3); Christmas Activity Packet (p. 3); Christmas Movie Nights (p. 4); Advent Book Read Along (p. 5); Sing We Joyous (p. 5); and much more.



FIRST
UNITED
CHURCH OF
OAK PARK

FROM THE COUNCIL MODERATOR . . .

The Council approved several new initiatives to foster our community of care and to further the mission priorities of our Church:

First, welcome to our new Community Minister! Council accepted with gratitude the Rev. Beth Dickerson's offer to serve as a volunteer Community Minister assisting the pastoral staff in meeting increased needs for pastoral care and to provide emotional and spiritual support to our members who feel isolated or are struggling. We welcome Beth, a retired UCC pastor, and her husband Paul to our church family.

Second, we look forward to supporting an asylum-seeking family in the near future. Council approved a proposal from the Faith in Action Team for our church to assist St. Christopher's Episcopal Church of Oak Park in the support of an asylum-seeking family. More on this initiative, the family our church will be supporting, and the opportunities for volunteers will be announced in the weeks to come. Thank you to Kathy Pederson who has spearheaded this initiative and who also has agreed to serve as leader of the Migration Ministries sub-team of Faith in Action.

And third, First United continues to go green! Council approved a proposal by the Environmental Justice sub-team of

Faith in Action to subscribe to portions of community solar farms expected to go online in Spring 2021. Solar panels at the church are not required nor are there any other start-up costs. In addition to supporting green electric power and doing our part to save God's green earth, savings on electricity costs are anticipated. Thanks to Art Spooner and Jim Babcock for their leadership on this initiative.

In addition to adopting these new initiatives, the Council also reflected on the "State of the Church" – in particular, how COVID-19 has affected our church community and ministries. Council members shared suggestions and strategies to keep our community connected and informed of the ways and church resources available to help those who are ill or suffering. We will continue to discern ways to stay in community even as opportunities to be together physically continue to be limited.

With prayers for good health for all
and with thanks for our community,
Sallie Smylie, Moderator

Fourth Sunday Offering

Our December Fourth Offering is going to the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (NESSL), based in Beirut. NESSL has established a new NGO (non-profit group) called Compassion Protestant Society which supports the internally displaced Syrian population, other Syrians in need, as well as Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Aid is provided to Syrians of all faiths, and has been ongoing since the beginning of the crisis. You can help our partners by donating to the NESSL relief efforts.

NESSL's efforts have been complicated this fall by the explosion in the Beirut harbor that destroyed about one-half of the city. At the same time, Lebanon is in crisis, with an inflation rate that makes paychecks almost meaningless. Unemployment is at 80%. Whatever we can give will be gratefully received and well-used.

Worshipping Virtually Sundays at 11 a.m.

[CLICK TO JOIN ON YOUTUBE](#)

November 29—Advent I Do Not Be Afraid: Have Hope	Lydia Mulkey
December 6—Advent II Do Not Be Afraid: Be at Peace	John Edgerton
December 13—Advent III Do Not Be Afraid: Be Joyful	John Edgerton
December 16—Blue Christmas Wednesday, 7 p.m.	Alicia Reese
December 20—Advent IV Do Not Be Afraid: Give Love	Alicia Reese
December 24—Christmas Eve Premiering at 5 p.m.	
December 27—Christmas I	TBD



ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS HAPPENINGS



This time of year, the holidays and the season of Advent, is often referred to as the most joyful time of the year, but for many this is a particularly difficult season. It serves as a reminder of all the things and people we may have lost. It makes us feel even more severely the sufferings, pain, and loneliness we struggle with every day.

Blue Christmas is a worship experience that gives intentional time and space to all of those things we may be experiencing that make this time of year so difficult. There is no shame in the grief or pain we feel, nor in missing and mourning loved ones. Together we honor these experiences, all that it means to be human with poetry, prayer, scripture, silence, song, and reflection, lighting Advent candles in a new, symbolic way.



This year, we are trying something new: not only are we inviting you into the practice of daily devotionals, but we also invite you to write them! We hope this will be a lovely way to engage folks in our church family in a new, positive, and meaningful way.

Everyone has what it takes to be a devotional writer. Familiarity with the Bible is not required. We are only looking for about 500 words and we will provide you with scripture texts for inspiration and a few simple prompts or questions to choose from to guide your writing. People care what you have to say.

[Click here](#) to access the signup genius to sign up to write a devotional. After you sign up, you will get a document with all you need to know.

If we still haven't convinced you to write a devotional, we invite you to receive the devotionals. Please [click here](#) to be added to the Advent Daily Devotional distribution list.

Holiday Season Packet

This resource was inspired by the self-care kit that was shared last month. In it you will find:

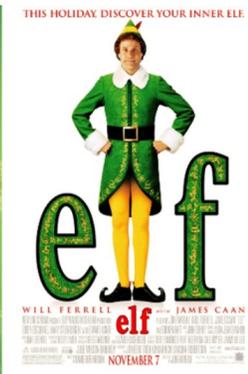
- A calendar of our Advent and Christmas events
- The Bible stories of Christmas
- An at-home Advent candle-lighting ritual & liturgy
- Definitions of some obscure church Christmas words
- Candy cane symbolism: Do you know what it means?
- Some Christmas readings/poems
- Lists of Christmas/holiday movies, songs, stories
- And a whole bunch of fun activities and crafts!

[Click here](#) to access this all-ages resource!



Voting Now Open for Christmas Movie Nights!

We're showing Christmas movies on Thursdays in December and want to know what you feel like watching. Check out the titles below and [vote here](#) for your favorites! We'll watch the top three finishers together during our December movie nights!



Shop for a Cause with Ten Thousand Villages

This holiday shopping season, you can do double the good when you shop at Ten Thousand Villages, a non-profit that serves as one of the world's largest fair trade retailers of handcrafted home décor and personal accessories from around the globe.

Mention First United when you shop at Ten Thousand Villages from December 6-11 and First United will receive 15% of your sale as a donation. Shop in person at 121 N. Marion Street or shop [online](#) and utilize curbside pick-up. Please be sure to tell them that you are with First United before they ring up your sale.



Holiday Food & Gift Basket Program, Reimagined

First United has always been generous in supporting the Holiday Food and Gift Basket program, sponsored by the Community of Congregations. Many of our families have made a tradition of shopping for and wrapping gifts, especially for recipient families with children. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic means that can't be done safely this year.

Instead, the program will give all recipients Target gift cards to buy needed items and groceries. HFGB served 2,000 people last year and hopes to raise \$100,000 for this effort in 2020. You can [donate online](#) or send donations to HFGB, P.O. Box 3365, Oak Park IL 60303.



Sing With Us: "Silent Night" for Christmas Eve Worship

Join the Children's Ministry Team in a virtual singing of "Silent Night" for Christmas Eve worship. Being apart during the global pandemic is hard. It is a joy to see the faces of our pastors and musicians on Sunday mornings, and it got the team to thinking: how can we see more people on Christmas Eve?

That's where you come in. Let's gather as many people as we can to make a virtual video of "Silent Night" that we all can enjoy on Christmas Eve. [Click here](#) for a full explanation of how our project will work, instructions for recording your own video, and instructions for submitting your videos. All videos are due by December 7.

Music at First - Sing We Joyous 2020 at Home

Sing We Joyous, the annual holiday spectacular, is back in a special 2020 online edition! Join all the regulars—The Oriana Singers, City Voices, Pro Musica Youth Chorus, and the Sing We Joyous Orchestra—in your own home via YouTube. You'll hear some of our traditional features including "Angels We Have Heard on High" and "Variations on *Deck the Halls*," as well as new music including a gorgeous rendition of "The Gift of the Magi" and a hilarious silent film version of "The Night Before Christmas." And of course, it wouldn't be *Sing We Joyous* without a special version of "The Twelve Days of Christmas." Plus sing-along carols and fruitcake...how can we fit all that into one show??

Join us for the premiere on Saturday, December 12 at 7:30 p.m. on YouTube, or watch anytime after that. Normally we rely on your ticket income to make Sing We Joyous happen, but this year we hope that you'll make a donation to help us meet our costs and to ensure the return of the live show next year. Go to <https://www.oriana.org> to RSVP, make a donation, and learn more about *Sing We Joyous 2020 at Home*. After you RSVP and/or donate, watch your email. On December 11, we will send you the link you will use to watch Sing We Joyous online. The link will work December 12 at 7:30 p.m. or anytime after that.



MIDPOINT Virtual Christmas Party and Gift Exchange

Some elves got creative and figured out a way for us to have our annual MIDPOINT Christmas Party and White Elephant gift exchange on Saturday, December 5, at 7:30 p.m.

Everyone is invited to join. We will gather on Zoom and use the breakout rooms a few times so everyone can socialize and open their white elephant gifts! We will also gather in one large group to sing a few carols and show off our gifts.

To receive the Evite with instructions for the Zoom call and for the gift exchange, please email Barbara Metric (barbarametric@comcast.net).



All I Really Want An Advent Read-Along

Alicia Reese invites you to intentional practice this Advent ...

It's hard to believe that Advent and Christmas are right around the corner! Soon the panic will set in about what to get who, how much to spend, what to cook, where to gather and how (especially in the midst of COVID), shopping, wrapping, and eating! The financial, emotional, familial, and physical stress we go through is not what the season is supposed to be about.

How we do the holidays this year is going to be different. It *has* to be different. I don't want the stress and pressure to control me. I want to enter into the season, meander through it, and come out on the other side having not just survived, but loved it and lived it with intentionality. For me, that means starting early.

We usually begin the season of Lent with intentionality starting with Ash Wednesday, but it doesn't always feel we give the same respect to the season of Advent.

All I Really Want by Quinn G. Caldwell is a book that I have wanted to read for years! This is the season I will make that happen and I invite you to join me. This book includes...

- brief writings that address the challenges and realities of the season
- a prayer for each morning and evening
- a calendar with one easy task to do each day designed to gently steer you toward the deeper meaning that underlies the season
- And the opportunity to make room, perhaps just enough room for God to show up.

The book is readily available at local retailers including [The Book Table](#).

In order to keep myself accountable, I created a reading schedule with a weekly opportunity to gather in Zoom for discussion. Please RSVP to me (areese@firstunitedoakpark.com) to join! We will meet on Mondays from 9-9:45 a.m. Together we will read that morning's devotional and prayer as well as discuss what we have read and experienced up to that point.

- Monday December 7 - discuss pages 1-33
- Monday December 14 - discuss pages 33-63
- Monday December 21 - discuss pages 63-93
- Monday January 4 - discuss pages 93-159
- Monday January 11 - discuss pages 159-the end of the book

COMMUNITY OF CARE

Deacons: Your Spiritual Caregivers

Given our current context, many are struggling with a myriad of challenges: financial, emotional, mental health, physical well-being, stress, anxiety, grief, and more.

If you are experiencing a situation for which you could use some prayer and/or support, please, reach out to your deacon. If you don't know who your deacon is, please contact Alicia Reese (areese@firstunitedoakpark.com).

Save the date! Prayer Circle to return in January!



Virtual Chapel for Prayer with Deacons!

Sundays, about 10 minutes after worship has ended, two deacons will be available for 30 minutes in Zoom for a more private time of prayer for those in need. They can pray with or for you, offer you a virtual blessing and be a listening ear. Follow this [link](#) to join them.

Second & Fourth Mondays 10-11 a.m.



The Prayer Shawl Ministry creates and provides handcrafted shawls to those in our church family who may benefit from knowing that we are thinking about them. Join us in Zoom to knit, crochet and engage in fellowship.

It is a lovely way to start the week! Beginners and experts—all are welcome. This is a wonderful way to provide care for our community while participating in self-care.

If you are unable to join us in Zoom but would still like to create and contribute shawls to this ministry, please contact Alicia Reese (areese@firstunitedoakpark.com).



December 6	Self-Care: FUJI & FUSH Youth Board for FUSH
December 13	Holiday Movie or Activities
December 22	Holiday Movie or Activities
December 27	Off for Christmas
January 3	Youth Board Only

Technology Primer: Keeping Us Connected

As part of First United's strategic plan, we seek to cultivate a community of care, a particular challenge in a time of global pandemic. Care begins with connection, and connection begins with communication. Communication itself does not foster connection, but it can bring folks to the table.

Currently, technology is our best tool for communication. To help you connect—refreshing memories if this is old hat or introducing our methods if you are new to First United—we offer this short overview of the technology that we use

Memberlink and Churchlife

Memberlink is the church's database. It contains person, contact, and membership information as well as other more detailed information. If you have a Memberlink account, you can download Churchlife (an app for your smart device that lets you access basic personal and contact information in the database). A PDF with basic instructions for accessing Memberlink is available by [clicking here](#).

Constant Contact

Constant Contact is the email system that we use for sending out regular communications such as the Tuesday Evotionals, Thursday Eblasts, and occasional announcements. Sometimes we also build additional distribution lists for specific communications such as this year's Advent Daily Devotions. Please note that simply because we have your correct information in the database (Memberlink), that does not mean you will get all the church emails. You have to separately subscribe to receive the emails.

If you have not been receiving the Evotionals or Eblasts it is probably for one of the following reasons:

1. You have not subscribed to receive them;
2. You unsubscribed from receiving them;
3. You have a new email address and have yet to subscribe again;
4. You are using a different email address than the one that you used to subscribe; or
5. Your email settings are sending them to your "junk" or "spam" folder.

Here are some troubleshooting steps if you are not receiving First United emails. For issues 1-4 above, you will need to subscribe or resubscribe using these easy steps:

1. Scroll to the bottom of the [First United homepage](#).
2. Just before the bottom of the page you will see a yellow section that says, "Keep up with the latest news at First United."
3. Simply type your email address (the one where you want church emails to be sent) in the [Email Address] field provided.

4. Click the [Subscribe] button.

For issue number 5, you may still need to subscribe or resubscribe yourself, but first check your "spam" or "junk" folder to see if that's where your emails from the church are ending up. If so, you can go into your settings and change that. The steps to fix mistaken spam vary by email service. Adding "office@firstunitedoakpark.com" to your contacts often takes care of the issue.

Additional Communications Tools

- Our website: firstunitedoakpark.com
- Our Facebook page: facebook.com/firstunitedoakpark
- Our YouTube channel: youtube.com/channel/UCtFAOpHMykGgFGFDaC05j7A

These are good links to bookmark in your browser so that you can access them easily.

Please reach out to Communications Administrator Heather Vanderberg (hvanderberg@firstunitedoakpark.com) if you have questions. We want to make sure everyone is getting all of the information they need and want.

Humans of First United: Community Connections

The Communications, Fellowship, and Newcomers Teams have been exploring what it means to be a community of care. To care for one another, we need to get to know one another. But learning about each other is particularly tough when we are forced to remain apart.

Taking inspiration from the [Humans of New York](#) project and the work of Studs Terkel, we are developing a project that gives First United members an opportunity to have one-on-one conversations with people that they might not otherwise meet outside of coffee hour in the lounge and then to introduce each other to our First United community. Watch for an invitation to participate in the January 2021 Messenger Bell. If you would like to join our teams in the development of this project, please reach out to Communications Administrator Heather Vanderberg (hvanderberg@firstunitedoakpark.com). We cannot wait to connect with all the Humans of First United.

Dinner and a Movie Returns

Join Ron Haas for dinner and a movie the second Friday of each month starting January 8. Watch the Thursday Eblasts for more details and sign-up information.

Faith in Action Peace Corner—Vigil For Peace

On November 1, we gathered in an outside prayer service to pray for peace. At the end of the service, the church bells range for a stunningly long time to memorialize lives lost to COVID-19, gun violence, police violence, and all of our other recent losses.



Marilee Castaneda and Joe Guevara play “Dona Novis Pacem.”



Lois Thiessen Love reads the names of those lost in 2020.



Sandy Jefferson sings “Let There Be Peace on Earth.”



Lead Pastor John Edgerton signs the banner memorializing our prayers for peace.

Our Prayer for Peace

Oh God, for the heartbroken of the City of Chicago
Those parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents,
Those grieving lives lost too soon,
We lift them in prayer.

May the peace that passes all understanding attend them.

For all those gathered here tonight
Grieving the loss of loved ones,
We lift them before the light of your love
That you might embrace them,
That your spirit might attend them.

God, in these quiet moments
We offer before you the prayers of our hearts
Giving to you and to you alone those fears and joys that
are closest to our hearts.

Listen now, oh God,
To these prayers offered in the silence of our hearts...

Oh most loving God,
Bless us.
Help us know the way.
If you show us what is right,
we will strive to do it.
Bless us, oh God.
Amen.

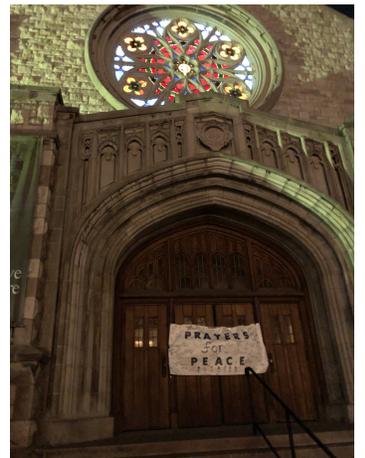


Photo credits: Debby Preiser and Lois Thiessen Love



We lift up the prayers that have been shared in worship.

For the wider world:

- For the coming holiday season and those for whom it will be an extremely difficult time
- For all those who have not and will not be able to see and hug loved ones
- For those struggling with addiction and for those who love them
- For the future of our country
- For the millions who are unemployed
- Those who are sick or recovering from COVID
- For those who have died of COVID and for their loved ones who mourn them
- For the staggering rise in number of COVID cases and deaths
- For all who are struggling with loss of connection and mental health issues
- For all those whose faith is exhausted or strained
- For all the health care workers

Concerns for members and friends of First United:

- For Doug Sorsensen and family following the death of his brother, Jim
- For Ken Honderich and family on the passing of his sister, Marilyn
- For Kathy Pederson and family on the passing of her brother Joe
- For all the saints and their loved ones that we named on All Saints and all those we didn't name
- For all of our members who have or are recovering from COVID
- For Marilyn Heinrichs and family following the death of her beloved husband, Ralph
- For the Guevara family mourning the death of Aunt Fe
- For Carole Bergstraesser battling pancreatic cancer
- For Betty Gehring, Walter Miller, Kristin Gehring, and the entire family as they grieve the death of Phil Gehring
- For Marsha Hubbuch and family grieving John, and also grieving six-year-old Owen
- For Hilda Nieves and family grieving her beloved husband, Barry Abrams

Celebrating Joys:

- For Lois Merrill's daughter and family recovered from COVID
- For Ally Vertigan being approved for ordination in the UCC
- For family and friends
- For birthdays
- For Halloween celebrations

CHECK OUT OUR RECENT EVOTIONALS

[Click here to read online](#)

November 3	A Prayer for Election Day	Alicia Reese
November 10	Lolling About	John Edgerton
November 17	Friends and Kinfolk	Lydia Mulkey
November 24	Walking Around in the Dark	John Edgerton

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submissions

to www.firstunitedoakpark.com/eventbuilder by the 15th



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OF OAK PARK**

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