

The Ascension

ADVENT 2024

ASCENSIONPITTSBURGH.ORG



CHRISTMAS EVE, 12/24 @ 10PM
FESTIVAL EUCHARIST



Worth The Waiting



By Peter Coelho, Rector

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When our children were younger, Shannon and I loved reading the Christmas story *Who is Coming to Our House?* In this simple story, various stable animals excitedly prepare for and eagerly anticipate Jesus' arrival. Our kids and we alike delighted in the anthropomorphic animals, each playing their part - except for the rat. Having dealt with some unwelcome visitors in our rental, we had no love for the rat. "Pipe down," we all said when the rat doubted the Savior's coming.

While the book was written for Christmas, in many ways it is more appropriate for Advent. Advent is the season of expectation and waiting. Like those stable animals, the church prepares for Jesus' arrival.

The waiting of the church can be understood in three related ways.

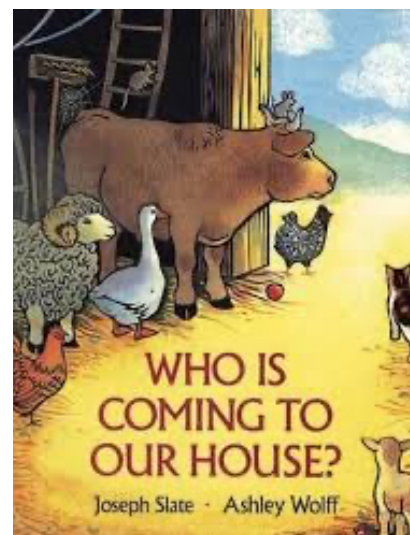
First, and most basic, the church anticipates Christmas and its celebration of the incarnation during Advent. We recall Jesus' coming as a child, the light of the world. We remind ourselves of the reality that he, the Christ-child, has come to our great benefit and God's great glory.

Second, the church looks forward to Christ's second Advent. Each week during the liturgy of the table we proclaim to ourselves, to one another, and to the world that "Christ will come again." Advent as a season reflects this fundamental posture for the followers of Jesus.

It is this kind of waiting that relates to the themes of judgment and penitence during Advent. The church anticipates Jesus coming as judge. While this can be disconcerting, and it rightly provokes humility and seriousness regarding the pattern of our own lives, this is also something we can wait for with eager anticipation. During these four weeks, we look to Jesus as the one who judges with equity and righteousness. Jesus is never unfair in the judgment He renders. He is always just.

The third kind of Advent waiting relates to what the Book of Common Prayer identifies as Jesus' "daily visitation." The

church waits upon Jesus in the grand sweep of history. We also wait upon him daily, in the ordinary happenings and non-events of our lives. Just as Jesus will come, he is now present and drawing near by the Holy Spirit. Just as His final coming is something we eagerly anticipate and prepare for, so too is this daily visitation. Just as the church prepares for Jesus' second coming (alongside the animals preparing for the first in our beloved children's book), so too does the church prepare to receive Jesus daily.



This daily preparation takes the form of all manner of practices or disciplines. Set times of prayer (the daily office), personal and ongoing prayer, fasting, service to others, silence, and solitude all are intended to create in us the capacity to receive the grace of God. As the church moves through this season of waiting, what practices might you take on to receive all that God has for you each day? In my own life, I want all that Jesus has for me. These practices are essential for that.

In a sermon for Advent the great saint, Bernard of Clairvaux, describes how we so often "cling tenaciously" to what is at hand, and so are unable to receive and lay hold of "things of substance," the things of God, the good things that Jesus has for us. Yet for those who create space, those who look to Jesus and His coming, in the end, and today, Bernard says "a great way has been opened up" to "utterly great and indescribable Majesty." Bernard states that what Jesus offers, the gift of himself, is worth making room to receive. The gift, Christ himself, is worth the wait.

This season we open our worship with the acclamation "Surely the Lord is coming soon." That is welcome news. He is worth the wait. Let's make room.



Advent and Christmas Schedule of Services

Service of Lessons and Carols: Sunday, December 22

There are many different stories that are told in the days and weeks leading up to Christmas, and a Service of Lessons and Carols is a unique way of enjoying one of these stories. The biblical narrative of fall and redemption is told through a series of scripture readings, reflections, and a variety of music. This year, the Service of Lessons and Carols will take place at both the 9am and 11am services on Sunday, December 22. It will be the same service at both times, featuring familiar carols as well as music from the choir, children's choir, and music team. In addition to being an opportunity to worship together, this is a particularly good service to invite people to - friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers. We hope you come and bring someone along with you! For a history of the Service of Lessons and Carols, please see Father Kevin's article later in this issue

Christmas Eve Family Service at 6 pm

All are invited to this warm service that is designed with children in mind. We will celebrate the nativity of Jesus with a children's pageant and sing the great carols of Christmas, concluding with Silent Night by candlelight. Childcare for children aged 3 and under will be provided. Children aged 4 and older are with us for the service. Please remember to bring your bells to ring in the birth of Jesus!

Christmas Eve Festival Eucharist at 10 pm

Our late Christmas Eve service will feature a Festival Procession, incense, candles, and the great music of the season in celebration of the birth of the Christ child. Childcare is not provided. Please remember to bring bells!

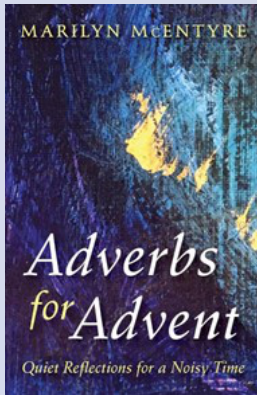
Christmas Day Service of Holy Eucharist at 10 am

The lessons are different from Christmas Eve so that those who wish to make this their second service of Christmas may join those who prefer quiet to the festival celebrations on Christmas Eve. Childcare is not provided.

Advent Devotionals

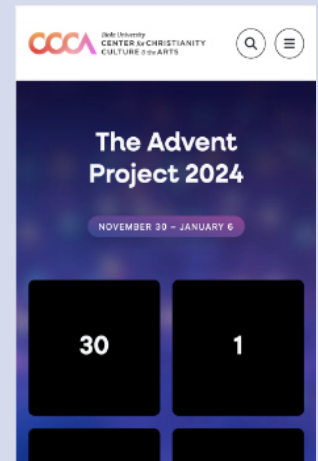


By Kevin Antlitz, Assistant Rector
kevin.antlitz@ascensionpittsburgh.org



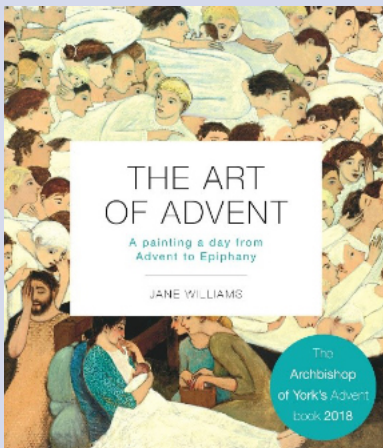
Adverbs for Advent: Quiet Reflections for a Noisy Time by Marilyn McEntyre

Written by Dr. Marilyn McEntyre, an English professor and writer, this compilation of short essays explores classic Advent themes like waiting, anticipation, and attention. The daily readings are short and sweet. This is a great option if you are short on time. I am confident it will help you practice the presence of God during Advent.



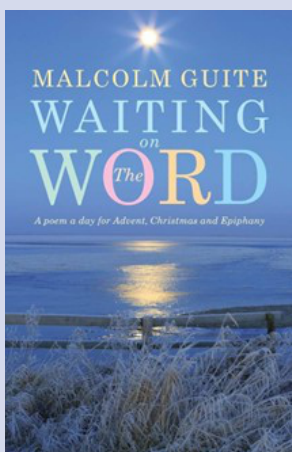
The Advent Project by The Center for Christianity, Culture & the Arts

The Center for Christianity, Culture & the Arts (CCCA) at Biola University has produced an online Advent devotional for over a decade and it's always very good (even if it's a bit of content overload). It includes Scripture, visual art, music, poetry, and a written reflection. If you're someone who wants a devotional sent to your inbox every day, this one may be for you. It's free. You just need to sign up on the CCCA website (<https://ccca.biola.edu/>).



The Art of Advent: A Painting a Day from Advent to Epiphany by Jane Williams

Written by Jane Williams, a Professor at St. Mellitus College and the wife of the former Archbishop of Canterbury, this beautiful little book invites us to ponder some great works of visual art. Each painting is accompanied by a short commentary that brings it to life. Dr. Williams also includes thoughtful questions for discussion and reflection as well as short prayers to lead us in conversation with God.



Waiting on the Word: A Poem a Day for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany by Malcolm Guite

This is my all-time favorite Advent devotional and one of my favorite poetry anthologies. Susan and I have read this without fail for the past 10 years. The poems are compiled (and many are even written) by Malcolm Guite, an Anglican priest and poet. Throughout the book, he offers rich and insightful commentary to selected poems. It's a lovely way to walk through Advent ... and if you aren't already a lover of poetry, this book might make you a convert.

Praying Into Advent Hope



By Lauren Scharf, Staff Priest

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"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name; indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Luke 1:46-55



A s I write this article, we are mere days away from the presidential election. I am acutely aware of the uncertainty that many, me included, feel about the days, weeks, and months ahead. I sit here with, admittedly, an anxious heart, my thoughts continually and unhelpfully caught up in wondering what will have happened when this is published. Where will we be as a country?

As we enter Advent in a time that could prove to be tumultuous either nationally or personally (or both!), I find that my heart is drawn to Mary: Mary, who magnifies the Lord in the midst of great uncertainty and great tumult in her own life. Mary, who has been chosen and anointed for a very particular, blessed, and profoundly difficult task. Mary, who will bear the scorn of her neighbors, friends, and family because of the Lord's call on her life. Mary, who is called to believe and live into a great impossibility.

Even during so much that was unknown and uncertain, we find record of her rejoicing in God her

Savior. In Mary's song of praise, called "the Magnificat," she grounds herself in the firm foundation of the character and nature of our God - a character which He manifests in His gracious actions towards His people. He is our only and true hope now and for the future.

As we enter Advent, a season of waiting, let us as a community receive Mary's invitation to rejoice in the face of uncertainty, to glorify the Lord even when our hearts feel troubled. I invite you to pray with Mary and make her prayer of praise your own.

In what ways do you sense that the Lord has "looked with favor" on you? Where have we seen His "great mercy" towards us? What actions of God in the past might we lean on when we are in seasons of restless waiting?

As Mary awaits not just the birth of her child, but an uncertain and unknown future, I invite you to wait with her for the return of her Son. I invite you to bring your heart in line with hers as she rejoices with certain hope, not in any particular of this world, but a hope that rests in Christ alone. Christ who has died, Christ who has risen, Christ who WILL come again. And then all will be very well.

A Brief History of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols



By Kevin Antlitz, Assistant Rector
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I have a very powerful memory of my first Lessons and Carols service. Susan and I were living in Boston at the time and a seminary professor invited us to join him for the service at Boston University’s Marsh Chapel. We had never heard of “Lessons and Carols” and had no idea what we were in for.

Led by a fantastic Director of Music and an excellent choir, we were absolutely floored by the beauty of the music and the thoughtful arrangement of Scripture. I don’t remember every carol, but I vividly remember singing “Jesus Christ the Apple Tree” for the first time. This has since become one of my favorite carols and I may or may not have begged Gary Harger to include it in this year’s service!

In college and seminary, I had spent years learning from Anglican writers including Dorothy Sayers, John Stott, and N.T. Wright. But this was my first real taste of Anglican *liturgy*. It was a majestic experience. While it’s probably too dramatic to say it changed our lives, it’s not an exaggeration to say this service played a part in our becoming Anglican.

Even after just one experience, it was abundantly clear why the Festival of Lessons and Carols has been a cherished Christmas tradition for almost 150 years. Like in so many places around the globe, this special service has become a beloved tradition at Church of the Ascension. I want to share a little bit about its history and meaning.

The very first Lessons and Carols service was held late at night on Christmas Eve in 1880. The faithful gathered in a large wooden shed in Truro, a cathedral city in the southwestern tip of England. The shed was a temporary home for the faithful as the stone cathedral was being constructed.

According to church historians, there is evidence that the medieval church crafted similar carol services, and these were held in the years leading up to 1880. That said, the Lessons and Carols service as we know it today was crafted by Bishop Edward White Benson (1829-1896). E.W. Benson was the first Bishop of Truro, and he would eventually become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1883.

The reason why Bp. Benson devised the service is quite interesting. It is said that the bishop was much disappointed with the alternative forms of revelry that took place in the local Cornish pubs around Christmas (read: ale, lots of ale). To



encourage a more wholesome celebration of the greatest event in human history, he created this service of Lessons and Carols.

In good Anglican fashion, Bp Benson drew from the Church's ancient liturgical tradition to create the liturgy. Following the medieval custom of a sequence of nine lessons, Benson designed the service around nine passages of Scripture (lessons) threaded with nine Christmas-themed hymns (carols). The idea was a hit! Some 400 people attended the first service in 1880. Truro has hosted it every year since.

Almost half a century after the first service in Truro, Lessons and Carols debuted at King's College Chapel in Cambridge, England on Christmas Eve in 1918. Though the service was created at Truro, it is now most widely associated with King's. This is thanks, in large part, to the BBC broadcasting the service almost every year since 1928.

The Lessons and Carols service at King's was arranged by the Dean of the College, a man by the name of Eric Milner-White. Although the service debuted at King's in 1918, the service – at least as we have come to know it – took its final shape the year after. In 1919, Milner-White made some slight changes to the order and selection of passages and music including beginning the service with the hymn "Once in royal David's city," all of which has become standard.

Our Lessons and Carols service at Ascension picks up on this great tradition. As with Lessons and Carols services around the globe, our service begins with this classic hymn. And, while the carol selections change from year to year, we read more or less the same lessons that were selected back in 1919.

As the Introduction to the 2018 King's College Order of Service points out, the lessons are the real true source of the service's power:

"Wherever the service is heard and however it is adapted, whether the music is provided by choir or congregation, the pattern and strength of the service, as Milner-White pointed out, derive from the lessons and not the music. 'The main theme is the development of the loving purposes of God ...' seen 'through the windows and the words of the Bible'."

I love how Dean Milner-White puts it here. As beautiful as the music may be, the central message of the service really is the loving purposes of God in human history. This comes through powerfully as we hear selections from Genesis, Isaiah, and the Gospels.

Together, these pivotal passages of Scripture tell the great drama of redemption. They point our eyes to the glory of our humble Redeemer and remind us of the hope we have in Jesus. It's hard to imagine a better way to celebrate one of the greatest events of human history: the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

If you've never experienced the Lessons and Carols service, I hope you'll join us this year on Sunday, December 22 at the 9am or 11am service. If the service has become one of your cherished traditions, I hope you'll consider inviting a friend to join you this year so they can experience the richness for themselves.

A New Welcome Gift



By Jess Bennett, Curate

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With our new building space in full swing, one of Ascension's ministries has gotten a facelift: the Connection Desk! Our Welcome Team has been able to greet, direct, and answer questions about the life of our church from behind a beautiful, centrally located space right outside the Nave. Whether or not you are new, if you would like help using the app, finding a community group, or contacting a ministry leader, come ask!

We are delighted to introduce our new Welcome gift for newcomers — a **pocket-sized Compline booklet**. Compline is the “closing chapter” of the Anglican Daily Office and is often referred to affectionately as “Bedtime Prayer” or “Night Prayer.” Especially if you're new to the Anglican tradition, this is a lovely way to feel the rhythm of our daily prayer practices. Newcomers, we invite you to stop by and pick one up!

Ok, ok. Even if you *aren't* a newcomer — these booklets are beautiful, and we'd love for you to have one too. We anticipated that many would want to bring one home, so we've printed plenty! Please feel welcome to come to the Connection Desk and request one — we just ask to limit 1 per household (or 2 if you plan to pray with kids/have another reason).

Come grab a Compline booklet and join Christians all over the world in these prayers before you sleep. *The Lord Almighty grant us a peaceful night and a perfect end. Amen.*

A Thank-You from Ascension's College-Age Ministry



Thank you for making the Parish Retreat Coffee Bar such a success! We served up over 100 fresh cups of hand-brewed coffee and had a great time chatting with so many Ascensionites. Every dollar you spent supporting the coffee bar contributed to our college-age young adults getting to enjoy the Parish Retreat weekend free of charge, which is such a blessing!

Did we blow a few power fuses with our water kettles? Yep. Did we forget essential equipment at home? Sure did. Will we run this again next year? If the Lord wills!

CAYG This Christmas!



By Josh Bennett, Director of Youth Ministry (Interim)

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If you are a student in grades 6-12, we hope you will join us for our CAYG (Church of the Ascension Youth Group) Christmas parties, December 15 from 5:30-7:30pm!

That's right, parties! One party for middle school and one party for high school — same time, different spaces.

Come enjoy some holiday cheer as we play games, eat good food, sip on cocoa, sing together, and revel in the joy that is ours in Christ our Savior who was born!

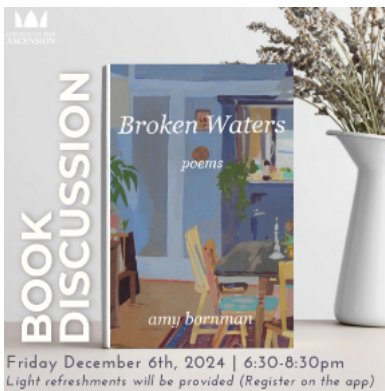
Register using the Church Center App, and for more information about CAYG or to receive our regular email updates, contact me!

Coming up in December!



Sing for Advent!

Come sing with the choir for the season of Advent. The Choir meets on Thursday evenings from 7pm – 9pm in the Millard Multipurpose Room. We'd love to have you join us for the full rehearsal, but you may also choose to come to the first hour of rehearsal as we prepare for Lessons and Carols on Dec 22. Rehearsals begin Thursday, Nov 14 and continue through December with a rehearsal on Saturday, Dec 21. Singers of all voice types and abilities are welcome. Email jenn.miller@ascensionpittsburgh.org for more information.



Book Discussion: Broken Waters by Amy Bornman

Friday, December 6 at 6:30pm

In her newest book Broken Waters, poet Amy Bornman navigates the uncharted territory of a first pregnancy and an unfurling crisis of faith by turning to confessional poetry and the text of the Bible in alternating turns. Amy will join Mother Lauren to discuss her poetry and the experiences that led to the creation of this bold and deeply prayerful collection. Light refreshments will be provided. Please register on the app.



Explore Ascension: Saturday, December 7 from 1 pm – 4 pm

Interested in learning more about Ascension? Anglican history? Please join us on Saturday, December 7 from 1pm – 4pm for an afternoon designed for those who are brand new, those who have been around for a few months and still feel 'newish', those who want to know more about Ascension and Anglicanism, as well as for those who want to become members. Childcare is provided. Please RSVP by filling out the form on our website/app or email jess.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org and let Jess know you hope to join us.



St. Nick's Night Market

Sunday, December 8 from 5pm – 7pm

Join us for St. Nicholas Night Market, an event where local artisans gather to sell their wares and engage with our community. We have fun activities for kids, warm beverages for visitors, and beautiful music for passersby. The Revival Chili and BBQ food truck has agreed to join us. We will have artisan tables, fun activities for kids, and tours of the Nave scheduled throughout the evening. We hope to empower our artists and give them the opportunity to share their work. Likewise, we hope to create a space where newcomers can meet our community and visit our church. The St. Nicholas Night Market is a wonderful chance to connect with our neighbors, celebrate our artists, all while enjoying some Christmas shopping.

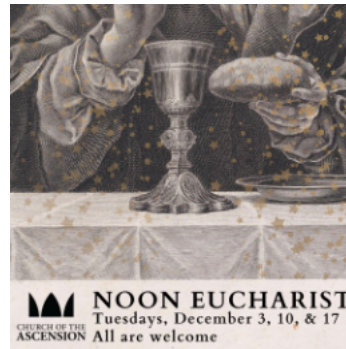


Bake and Give Advent Service Project

Sunday, December 1 and following

Parents of children of any age are encouraged to take an Oatmeal Chocolate Chip Cookie Jar home,

bake the cookies together as a family, and deliver them together to a member of our church family. The name is on the tag.



Advent Noon Eucharist

Tuesdays December 3, 10, and 17

Join Ascension Clergy and Staff for an Advent Noonday Eucharist on three Tuesdays. We will gather in the chancel choir stalls for this special time of prayer and devotion

at the beginning of our liturgical year as we both remember and anticipate the coming of Jesus.



Advent Soul Care

Saturday, December 7 from 9:30 am – 11:00 am

Soul Care features a morning of quiet prayer, gentle reflection, scripture meditation, and holy

listening. Our special focus will be on the season of Advent. Sign-up on the Church Center app.



International Holiday End of Semester Party

Saturday, December 14 from 5:30pm – 8:30pm

You are invited! Internationals and Ascensionites will mingle on this evening designed with music, carols, word games, food, and even

a tour of the Nave! It's always helpful to sign up on the app! Plan on bringing your favorite seasonal food.



Newcomer Potluck

Sunday, December 15 from 5pm – 7pm

Newcomers are invited to join clergy and staff for a Christmas-themed potluck. Kids welcome too! Sign

up on the app to let us know you are coming.



Legacy Christmas Luncheon

Thursday, December 19 from 12:30 pm – 2:30 pm

Join with our fellowship of seniors as we eat delicious food, sing carols, and enjoy a special Christmas program. Sign up on the app or email kafisher208@gmail.com.



Christmas Children's Choir

Children in grades 3 - 5 are invited to sing for the Service of Lessons and Carols on Sunday, December 22 at the 9am and 11am services. They will learn the songs in Children's Church. Additionally, there will be a rehearsal on Saturday, December 14 from 10am - 11:30am and Saturday, December 21 from 11:30am -12:30pm. Both rehearsals will be held in the Nave. Please contact missheidielise@gmail.com with any questions.



Embracing Advent: Countdowns, Cookie Shares, and Costumes



By Catherine Slocum, Director of Children's Ministry
catherine.slocum@ascensionpittsburgh.org

As we journey through the seasons of the year, we engage with the children in Ascension's Kids' Church about the significance of the church calendar alongside other important calendars. The Gregorian calendar begins on January 1, filled with new hopes and resolutions, while the school year starts in late August, marking a transition into a new grade. Additionally, we discuss the four seasons: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Autumn. Importantly, the Church calendar also has its own seasons, beginning with Advent - a time dedicated to preparing our hearts for Christ's arrival. The word "Advent," meaning "the coming," beautifully captures this spirit of anticipation.

Embracing the Season

To fully embrace this joyful yet reflective season, it's essential to separate Advent from the overwhelming commercialism that often overshadows our preparations for Christmas. In her cookbook *A Continual Feast*, Evelyn Birge Vitz suggests that many find it beneficial to abstain from certain foods - such as meat, wine, or sweets - on specific days of the week. This practice serves as a reminder that we are in a time of preparation, distinct from the celebrations of Christmas.

Vitz also emphasizes focusing on the needs of those less fortunate, deepening our compassion during this season. The cold weather evokes images of the Holy Family seeking shelter, inspiring us to reach out and assist those in need, thereby nurturing empathy and generosity in our children.

Joyful Traditions

Advent brings genuine joys that enhance our anticipation. Simple traditions, such as gradually setting up a nativity scene or opening a window on an Advent calendar each day, ignite a sense of wonder. Singing hymns like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" adds a beautiful spiritual dimension to the season.

One delightful custom shared by Marie Von Trapp, the famous Austrian baroness, involves family members drawing names on the first day of Advent to become secret "Christ children," performing daily acts of kindness for one another throughout the season.

Opportunities at Ascension

At Ascension, our children have many opportunities to engage in this meaningful season beyond our Sunday worship. Families can participate in our "Clothesline

countdown Advent Devotional” and prepare cookies using ingredients from our take-home jars. This “Cookie Share Initiative” fosters family bonding through baking and creates connections when families deliver the homemade treats to fellow church members. Many of you may already create home Advent wreaths and light candles during mealtime; we also have a separate prayer guide available to assist parishioners in this beautiful ritual.

Join Us

We invite everyone to join in our various Advent opportunities, especially our Christmas Eve Family Service at 6pm, where children dress in costumes to help narrate the sacred story of the Holy Family. Costume fittings for the pageant will be held on December 15 in the New Catacombs between the 9am and 11am services. Together, let us prepare our hearts for the hope that Christmas brings!

As we observe this preparatory season of Advent, here’s a prayer from our Book of Common Prayer for Christmas Eve: *O God, you have caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true Light: Grant that we, who have known the mystery of that Light on earth, may also enjoy him perfectly in heaven; where with you and the Holy Spirit he lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.*

ASCENSION CHILDREN'S MINISTRY MINISTRY

CHRISTMAS PAGEANT



Costume Fitting: December 15
Rehearsal: December 21

And all the people will see it together...



By LuAnn Pengidore, Director of International Ministry

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As we know, Advent is not supposed to be a season of fast-paced shopping and decorating, but rather a season of waiting on the only One who can give us hope as expressed so clearly in Isaiah 40: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

In the international program, we have diverse people from 41 nations. Some are from very rough situations: Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Russian, Ukraine, and Mexico. Others are from more stable nations: Brazil, France, South Korea, Japan and China. All are seeking a better life during their stay in Pittsburgh (for them, a ‘wilderness’ of sorts) - either for 3 years as a post doc or settling permanently. Ultimately, they (like us) are looking for the glory of the Lord, but often find themselves waiting - for friendships, better jobs, and improved English so they are not at home feeling isolated with their children.

Many of these students attend one of the 5 Bible studies held weekly, worship on Sunday, attend the Hispanic ministry, or attend up to 2 English classes per week. By participating in our program through field trips, making new friends, talking with others at Conversation café, and participating in volunteer opportunities, some of their valleys are being raised up. Here are a few stories you might not know about.

We have 6 students participating in an Old Testament Bible study on Monday night. One student stated that he wanted to know the purpose of life for himself and his family. We have agnostics and those from other religions doing Bible study on Monday morning with 4 volunteers: Nancy, John, Jack and LuAnn. These Bible studies give students and teachers a chance to pray together and are helping to make some of their rugged places a plain.

Four families who welcomed new babies this fall enjoyed meals from our meal ministries. One of these families had a premature baby and were in and out of the hospital. Two other Japanese families whose fathers volunteer as interns at UPMC (using their own savings) say that these meals were very helpful given the cost of living here with small children. These meals and the visits made when dropping them off are a way that those far from home get a glimmer of the glory of the Lord.

Over the past year, 2 volunteers, Chris and John, have worked one on one with Wendy and Jianru as conversation partners. Wendy and Jianru now actively participate as a family at Ascension. Wenting, a Chinese researcher at Pitt who was baptized at Ascension, is a single mom with two boys, Howard and Patrick. She and the boys have been attending a Tuesday night international Bible study for two years with Mike and Betty. On All Saints



Day, after attending Daniel Behren's baptism class, Howard was baptized. These relationships and teachings helped to make straight in the desert a highway for Wenting's family and for Wendy and Jianru as well.

Judy, a very kind Chinese mom visiting her son, received a Bible last summer, and now attends English classes and a Monday morning Bible study. She brought several friends to the program. She also attends the international community group on Sundays twice a month. Three other students are taking part in the Advent Christmas Market this year selling Chinese art and baklava.

The Altar Guild has actively included Ping Ping, who is faithfully volunteering to set up the altar every Saturday. She likes practicing her English and getting to know Americans. She also enjoys giving back to the program as she has volunteered almost weekly with Daniel to help refugees with job applications. Additionally, the special needs ministry has warmly welcomed Bohan, who is doing a great job even though he is a very busy graduate student.

Approximately 35 - 40 students fill up the beautiful space in the Bailey Hall at Conversation Café on Wednesday mornings. Each Wednesday morning 10 - 12 volunteers, mostly from Legacy Seniors ministry, offer their facilitation skills to draw out students on various issues and help them with fluency. Before this class, 13 of these students are reading through the Jesus Story Bible with Timmy and Felicia, a Chinese grad student, to get the big picture of the gospel. Conversation Café as well as this Bible study are helping prepare the way for the Lord in the lives of these precious students.

Another story centers around our collaboration with Catholic Charities. Each semester Catholic Charities teaches a free course to a cohort of 10 students on how to lay Wi-Fi cable, put up antennas, and put in fire alarms. Two of our students are taking advantage of this free training and should be placed in well-paying jobs by January. Two other students received well-paying jobs in maintenance with Steiner realty, and 4 students have gotten jobs in childcare, with experience here at the church. Various parishioners have been instrumental in helping students obtain internships, have corrected their resumes and have performed mock interviews with them. These opportunities allow internationals to see God's mercy and kindness.

Thank you, Church of the Ascension, for loving the strangers among us in such tangible ways. The dream Isaiah saw is becoming real within our own walls. The Glory of the Lord is being revealed!

Take a Glimpse!



By Daniel Behrens, Ascension Missionary in Residence

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“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Eph. 2:10, ESV)

Sometimes we get a glimpse of how God is preparing good things for us, far beyond what we could imagine. This verse from Ephesians comes to mind as I reflect on how God has provided for our newest Refugee Welcome Circle family. Ascension has been collaborating with Hello Neighbor for more than a year and a half. Our first four families were Arabic speakers from Syria, but those in Family #5 are Spanish-speakers from Ecuador and Venezuela. The Mendozas (Mom and Dad and three daughters) arrived from South America in early September. I want to share just a few of the clear blessings that have surrounded the Mendoza family so that you can thank God with us and consider what “good works” God might be preparing for 2025! The family gave me permission to use their names but not pictures in this article.

God provided a home!

Finding adequate housing for new refugee families is a huge challenge. You may know that our fourth Welcome Circle family spent several weeks in a hotel.

After our team said “Yes!” to the Mendozas, we scrambled to look for an apartment. There was a lot of suspense but ultimately the Lord provided a place for them just a few minutes from my family. In a whirlwind of generosity, volunteers from Ascension cleaned, furnished and equipped the apartment with donated goods which two Ascension families had stored in their garages (A big thank you to the Fernandos and Chislaghis!). Beyond the initial housing set-up, some of you jumped in to provide bicycles for the family and even donated a cyclist’s toolkit. The bikes have been a big help and allow the family to make small trips to the local Aldi.

God provided a community!

It is one thing to have a place to sleep, and another to be part of a community! There have been hopeful steps for the Mendozas in this process. Our team helped them start using trains and buses and to discover some Pittsburgh

gems. They have enjoyed outings to Point State Park, Page Dairy Mart, the Strip District for the Monster Pumpkin festival, and PNC Park (thanks to Pirates tickets donated to Hello Neighbor). Beyond seeing the sights, they are connecting with their new neighbors! Even in their first weeks they are planning outings and visits with other newly-arrived families from Venezuela. I am humbled to see their heart for hospitality, even as they are getting settled. They are getting to know local churches, including visiting Ascension and coming to one of our monthly Latino gatherings. I am so grateful for all these ways that God is providing them with a new community!

God provided opportunities!

With help from our team, the teenage girls started attending high school very quickly. The Lord was very kind to provide bussing for them, even though their home is, according to school policy, within walking distance. They did the very “Pittsburghy” two-mile uphill and downhill walk for their first few days; then were very relieved when the district added a stop to the bus route. This was a clear answer to prayer!

There is a shortage of ESL classes in Pittsburgh but with help from Lu Ann and our team, the parents were able to enroll in classes at Ascension which they are faithfully attending.

And, in one more amazing opportunity, the dad found a job working as a professional welder in a reputable, employee-owned steel company. He started in late October. WOW!

I do not wish to minimize the losses that accompany starting a new life or suggest that the Mendozas do not have big challenges. But along with the losses and challenges, we get to see how God is providing a new home, a new community and new opportunities for this precious family...and using us along the way!

Would you consider supporting a Refugee Welcome Circle in 2025? We will need help with gathering donations, setting up a house, and forming a “circle” of fifteen volunteers to continue walking with the family. Please talk with me if you want to jump in. It is an honor to have a small part in the great work that God has prepared for us!



CIAC is not a Boat

By Jen Hemphill, CIAC Administrator

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I personally don't know very much about immigration, and now that I have been helping out with CIAC for almost a year, I realize I know even less. Last January I began volunteering as the clinic's administrator and am in charge of communication, scheduling, and paperwork. I can now tell you that CIAC, pronounced like the little boat, stands for Christian Immigration Advocacy Center, and that the main office is in the Northside. CIAC Northside is a group of attorneys dedicated to providing low-cost legal help to limited income immigrants.

Here at Ascension, CIAC is a volunteer clinic that meets on Thursday evenings to answer questions that people connected with our International Ministry might have. Jen Tinker, an Ascensionite herself and an immigration attorney by vocation, volunteers her time to answer questions to the best of her expert ability.

As it turns out, immigration is a complicated and many-faceted issue and never once has there been a repeated question or answer. There is nothing simple or black and white about the concerns brought to the clinic. Each individual person or family who has a question, or likely questions, plural, brings their own unique story and situations in with them.

Part of the process that a person goes through to ask their urgent questions is the intake interview. Laura Coyt Zavala volunteers as our primary

Intake Administrator and Spanish interpreter/translator, and her main job is to interview the client. She guides them through a questionnaire and listens closely to their stories to get a full sense of what they are hoping to find out. This history allows our legal team to do the research necessary to give them a good answer. Sometimes, their question has a simple resolution and is easily answered. Sometimes, they need to be referred to outside legal counsel. We might connect them with JFCS, Ansar, Hello Neighbor or other free sources.

Being privy to the stories people bring in is an honor for us CIAC volunteers. We sign confidentiality agreements, so I will not relay specific details here, but I can give some idea of what brings people to us. After they have gone through resettlement, refugees might be interested in trying to find and reunify with family members languishing in refugee camps or in unstable, war-torn countries. Often ESL students have concerns about available pathways to gain employment visas, and the spouses of university students have concerns about whether they can work with the visa that they hold. Green card holders may have questions related to when and how often they are allowed to travel, especially if they still have family ties in their country of origin. And ultimately, they want to know when they can start the process towards becoming a full citizen, even though it may be years down the road.

Our hope is that these people also gain some relief from stress and anxiety just because they are heard when they come in to talk to us, and we all strive to provide a welcoming, hospitable space.

Another volunteer we have with the clinic is an immigrant herself, Irina. In her home country, she worked as an attorney. Here in the US, she is unable to gain employment at the same level, but she started out volunteering with Father Daniel and eventually reached out to see if there was any way she could help us. She has assisted with some important administrative tasks, creating and keeping up a contact list of immigration attorneys in the city who take referrals. She has also begun to help with intake interviews to gain experience and conduct them herself in the future. In this way, volunteering for CIAC allows her to use her skills and help others.

As we circle the bowl toward the presidential election in November (when this article was written), there are a lot of numbers and news stories being aired about immigration. It is alarming to realize how unstable the rest of the world is, even more unstable than the US feels in this season, and how many people cannot abide it and want to come here. However factual the information may be, part of what I love about being the administrator for CIAC is that it puts a face, indeed many different faces, and a more compassionate, human slant on that information for me. It helps me remember that there is a lot more to the statistics and political rhetoric than we can know.

Are you bilingual? Are you able to provide periodic accounting advice? Are you an attorney who can contribute occasional help with questions related to housing, family law, or other common legal questions? Do you feel you may have a calling to assist internationals? If so, please email me and hopefully we can find a place to plug you in.

Fearfully & Wonderfully Made

By James Scannell

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For this issue, I am interviewing Jesse Twichell. He is a “9 o’clock service guy”. If nothing else, I hope this column helps people in different services feel connected! I appreciate that a true introvert was willing to open up to all of us about his life and his challenges. Thank you, Jesse! A part of our discussion is below.

JS: Tell me about how you came to Ascension.

JT: I followed my brother here over 20 years ago, in about 2002. We were both recent college graduates and he had some friends here. For us it was a unique and different worship experience that really resonated. And we ended up sticking around.

JS: I’m wondering about the story with your hearing.

JT: I started losing my hearing in my early 20s, a sensorineural hearing loss. It became gradually more severe. By the time I was 26, I needed hearing aids. It then progressed to the point where even with very powerful hearing aids I couldn’t function in a hearing world very well. I adapted somewhat - I could lip read a bit. I combined sounds that I could hear with lip reading to communicate in some circumstances. For a year and a half now, I’ve had cochlear implants, a life-changing technology for me. They have allowed me to reenter the hearing world again and be more functional. It has been a huge blessing.

JS: How long did you experience such loss of hearing?

JT: I was hard of hearing to some degree for a good 15 years. It’s an invisible disability. I looked like a normal guy. Nothing looked as if there was a disability. But people with hearing loss like mine will tell you that it’s one of the most isolating disabilities. You just can’t connect with people.

JS: Tell me about the isolation. I’ve experienced that, too.

JT: Yeah, that was the hardest part. I’m naturally introverted, so I don’t mind being on my own all the time. In that respect I was OK, maybe lucky. Natural



extroverts who thrive on social connections - it’s much more difficult for them. The isolation felt like a classic situation of “darned if you do, darned if you don’t”. If I tried to connect with people I would inevitably feel like a failure and not be able to experience that satisfaction of making a friend, talking to family and friends, and sharing a laugh. And if I avoided social situations because I felt bad trying and failing, then I would feel alone and isolated. I think God taught me how to have a broken spirit through that.

JS: How was He there for you?

JT: I think He was there in the connections that I did have, providing a way for me to use the skills I have. When my hearing got really bad, I couldn’t keep doing the job I was doing in retail – it was too much communication. I was able to fall back on my skills of carpentry and doing house projects. God provided me another way to make a living. I learned construction trades. There was always a path that I could follow. When I hit a roadblock, God provided another way to do life.

JS: I'm so sad for you. I hope Jesus was your friend in the loneliness.

JT: Yes, there's a certain brokenness that Jesus works in. When you feel completely competent in all things, you lose that broken spirit that the Lord moves into. That's the gift - it's a mystery to me how that works.

JS: Did you ever learn ASL [American Sign Language]?

JT: I tried. I didn't stick with it. My mother, brother and I took classes together. It was tough for me - it's not just a language, it's a culture [deaf culture]. A very proud culture - and they should be. I didn't stick with it, and it didn't feel right for me. I was born as a hearing person and I went through my education as a hearing person, and it felt like trying to change my identity almost trying to do ASL.

JS: You're an outsider in the deaf community and an outsider in the hearing community,

JT: That's true.

JS: Did the church help or feel like another lonely space?

JT: That's a great question. It was both. I've always loved coming to Sunday worship services and have felt fed by the Holy Spirit here. Since we follow a liturgy and we have bulletins, I could read along. When I couldn't hear, I could read along. I could speak out, too, at the appropriate times. And that felt like inclusion. It became just how I worshipped. When I couldn't follow along with the songs, I could at least read the lyrics.

But yes, it was also a lonely space. Church - it often seems set up for couples and families. And in that "very deaf" period of life for me, I couldn't go out and meet people the way other people did. Being single can be tough, even for typical people, in the church.

Also, the church steers people towards small groups, and that was just a difficult thing to do. So yes, there were times when it felt like a lonely space.

JS: How do people show love to people who are introverted and lonely?

JT: People with communication difficulties are often lonely. I did have a thought about an event that the church might put on - a "nonspeaking" party where nobody says a word. You could use messages on your phone, or letterboards. I think that would be an interesting get-together. For people who are deaf or nonspeaking, it would open possibilities. There's a lot we could offer for people who can't communicate easily. It's a matter of asking those people what they would like. It would be different for different people.

JS: We could do art, too.... Good answer! I'm so struck by how deep your thoughts are. I'll bet the suffering has made you so sensitive to people with differences.

JT: I think my heart breaks more easily now. If I see someone with a disability, someone who is suffering, it pulls on my heart. Nobody escapes suffering. We can do better at supporting them. But we do need to remember there's no easy answers, no "why" - just "for the glory of the Lord". With that in mind we just try to learn from our experiences and see what God teaches us from them.

JS: Is there anything else you'd like to say to the church, or anything else you'd like to add?

JT: To the church, I'd say be patient with people. If it looks as if someone is not enjoying their experience at church, they might just be acting in ways that don't fit our understanding. Be patient with people who seem different.



CHRISTMAS EVE, 12/24 @ 6PM

FAMILY CHRISTMAS SERVICE



Worship Services **Sunday 9:00 am, 11:00 am Nave Services** with [YouTube](#) live stream.

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A Worshipping Community;
Equipping God's People; Sharing
Christ's Healing with a Broken World