

# The Ascent

ADVENT 2025

ASCENSIONPITTSBURGH.ORG



CHRISTMAS EVE, 12/24 @ 6PM

FAMILY CHRISTMAS SERVICE



CHURCH OF THE  
ASCENSION

# No Talent for Waiting



By Peter Coelho, Rector

[peter.coelho@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:peter.coelho@ascensionpittsburgh.org)

**S**amuel Beckett's 20th-century play, "Waiting for Godot," a classic, can easily be seen as an anti-Advent story. As the title suggests, the play can be interpreted as a subtle critique of those who place their hope in a transcendent power. The play mainly features two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, waiting for the character Godot. Throughout, they are completely passive. The awaited Godot, let the reader understand, never arrives. Long before Seinfeld, it was a story where nothing happened.

Advent is a season of waiting. These four weeks remind us that we are a people who have set our hope in the coming of Jesus. Each week, we proclaim the hope that "Christ will come again," but during this season, we especially lean into it. We highlight our waiting and remind ourselves that we are longing for something more.

Participating in Advent can make December feel like a strange and even challenging month. Even as the world enters into the joy and celebration of Christmas, at least tangentially connected to Jesus' first coming, we are reminded of the hope and longing for him to come again. As the church, we hold with the longing and desire for something more. To remain in this posture, while all the world is seemingly carried along by carols, takes will and discipline.

Beckett's play has been remarkably popular and resonant since its publication decades ago. It seems that, whether it is a part of the human condition or a particular characteristic of our current age, waiting for what we cannot see is very difficult.

In a recent trailer for the upcoming film "Hamnet," about William Shakespeare's son, the bard, played by Paul Mescal, says, "I have no talent for waiting," before pulling his wife into a grand hug. The truth is, very few of us do. We're all prone to impatience and distraction. All of us are easily dissuaded.

Whatever native talent we have for waiting, the season of Advent offers us a chance to strengthen this skill. Just as Mary, the mother of Jesus, experienced God's growth in her, this





season is a time for us to increase in His likeness. This is part of the gift of Advent. Among other benefits, the season can shape us in Christian hope and help us grow in our ability to wait.

During these four weeks, we embrace anticipation and longing. The Scripture readings, prayers, and songs in our communal worship guide us toward our future hope of Jesus' return. We cultivate a hunger and thirst for God's righteousness. In our worship, I encourage you to focus on these themes. What are you waiting for from the Lord? In what ways do you long to see His kingdom come more fully in your life and in the world? Allow those longings to shape your imagination and prayer life.

Beyond these corporate acts, Advent offers a chance to take on personal practices that build our ability to wait. Sometimes called a "little Lent," Advent often involves practices of self-denial such as fasting, silence, and solitude, or the giving of alms. These actions can help to tangibly remind us that our true satisfaction lies in the spiritual and eternal, not in the material possessions of the moment. They can serve to awaken a deeper hunger for God and His kingdom.

Alongside practices of negation, we can also direct our attention toward the one for whom we long and are waiting. There are devotional materials mentioned in

this issue. You might utilize music or icons to remind yourself of the beauty of Christ, and to further your anticipation of seeing him face to face. In certain traditions within the church, the practices of daily meditating upon the hope of heaven and recording aspects of the eternal goodness we anticipate in Christ help to foster hope and endurance. Such practices are wholly appropriate this Advent season.

Hilary, the 4th-century bishop of Poitiers, exhorted his fellow Christians in the practice of waiting by writing just as Christ's first coming in the incarnation gave hope of forgiveness of sin, *"so now she is certain that the second will bring her the fruit of remuneration. Suspended by this expectation and hope above earthly things, the Church aspires with joy equal to ardor to eternal goods... Let your hearts therefore follow their treasures. Let your thoughts be fixed above and your waiting be suspended to God."* In other words, church, grow in your capacity to wait for something more.

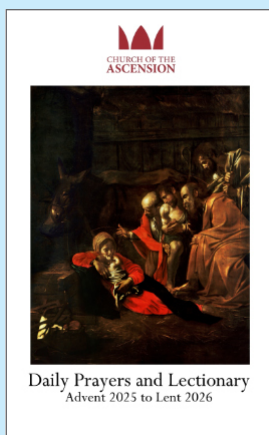
Christmas is a season of feasting. Look forward to and enter into that season of celebration with joy and freedom, reminded that the one for whom we wait has come and will come again. We don't wait passively and without hope. During this Advent, be encouraged to develop your capacity to wait. None of us has a talent for it, but by God's grace, we can grow in this posture of sure hope and eager anticipation.

# Advent Devotionals



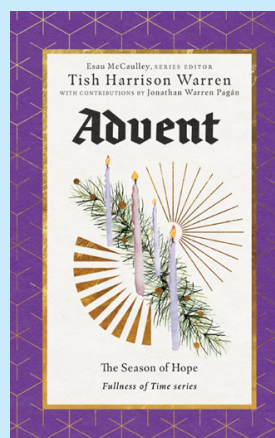
By Kevin Antlitz, Assistant Rector

[kevin.antlitz@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:kevin.antlitz@ascensionpittsburgh.org)



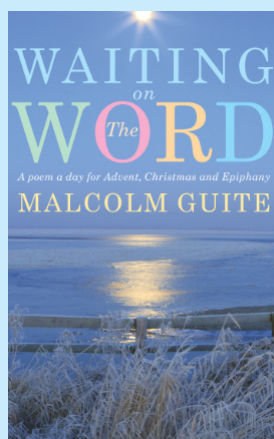
## Church of the Ascension's Daily Prayer Guide

Ascension produces accessible versions of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer found in the 2019 Book of Common Prayer. As we begin a new Christian year, using this Prayer Guide is a fantastic way to start a new (or kick-start an old) habit of daily time with Jesus in prayer and Bible reading. In addition to liturgies for daily prayer and a plan for reading the Scriptures, the Prayer Guides also include a helpful overview of the Church Calendar. These are free and can be found near the entrances to the Nave and at the Welcome Desk.



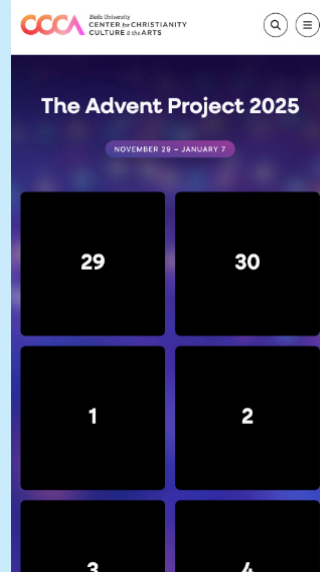
## Advent: The Season of Hope by Tish Harrison Warren

In this short but substantial book, Tish Harrison Warren, an Anglican priest (and former Associate Rector at Ascension) offers an introduction to the three "comings" of Christ that we anticipate during Advent. It's short, accessible, and substantial. If you're relatively new to Anglicanism or the Church Calendar, this is a great introduction to the season.



## Waiting on the Word by Malcolm Guite

This is my perennial favorite Advent resource. In this anthology of poetry that spans Advent through Christmastide, the poems are compiled (and sometimes 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 slow down and savor the seasons of Advent and Christmas.



## 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. It's always very good (even if it's a bit of content overload). The devotional includes Scripture, visual art, music, poetry, and a written reflection delivered to your email inbox every day. 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/>).

# Advent and Christmas Schedule of Services



## **Service of Lessons and Carols: Sunday, December 21 at 9am and 11am**

Ascension has had a long tradition of celebrating the last Sunday in Advent with a service of Lessons and Carols. The service consists of nine scripture readings that focus on the fall of humanity, the promise of the Messiah, and the birth of Jesus. Each reading is followed by a musical selection and, not unlike the Easter vigil, it is a place marker of where we are in God's story of redemption.

Originating in England in 1918, it was in part a response to the horrors of World War I, as well as a call for citizens to return to a worshipping community. In the uncertainties of our own times, the scriptures and our responses in song tell of the ongoing reality of the incarnation in the world and provide a rich opportunity for a vibrant dialog between God and his people. Rooted in the British Choral tradition, the service gained world-wide popularity from the yearly broadcast from King's College on Christmas Eve. Our service will be less formal but will retain its essential reflective format. We'll hear the scriptures read from young and old and respond as a congregation with contemporary and traditional songs led by the choir, music team and instrumentalists. This year the children will join us for the first part of the service and then be dismissed to Kids' church. There will be a homily but no communion. The service will be the same at both 9am and 11am. Consider coming as a family and perhaps inviting friends as we open our hearts to reflect as a community on the story of salvation in scripture and song.

## **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**

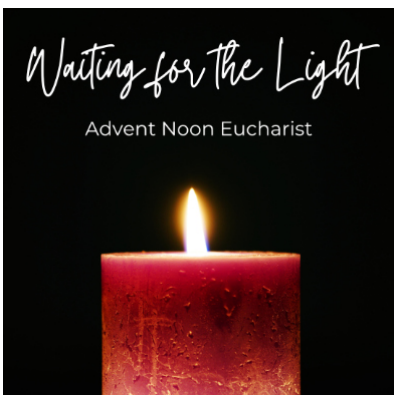
The lessons are different from Christmas Eve so that those who wish to make this their second service of Christmas may join those who prefer quiet to the festival celebrations on Christmas Eve. Childcare is not provided.

# Join Us This December



## Join the Choir for Advent

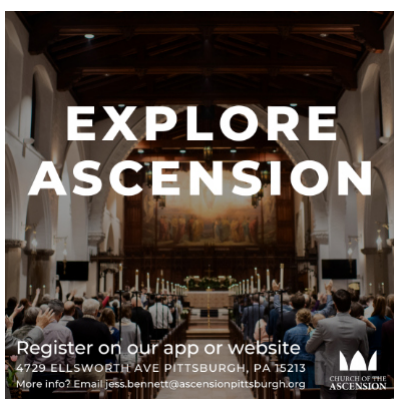
Come sing with the choir for the season of Advent and for Lessons and Carols. The Choir meets on Thursday evening from 7 – 9pm. We'd love to have you join us for the full rehearsal, but you may also choose to come to the first hour of rehearsal as we prepare for The Service of Lessons and Carols at the 9am and 11am services on December 21st. Singers of all voice types and abilities are welcome. Join us for 5 Thursday rehearsals beginning November 13 and a dress rehearsal Saturday, December 20. Contact Jenn Miller [jenn.miller@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:jenn.miller@ascensionpittsburgh.org) for more information.



## Advent Noon Eucharist

Tuesdays December 2, 9, and 16

Join us for Advent Noon Eucharist services on Tuesdays in December. The theme of these services is Waiting for the Light. While Advent is a season marked by bright lights and cheerful carols, our lives are not always so joyful. Using Habakkuk, Zechariah, and Joel as our guides, we will look forward to the light of Christ's coming with hope amid our present darkness.



## 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](mailto:jess.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org).



## Children's Choir for Lessons and Carols

The Children's Choir will sing for Lessons and Carols for both the 9am and 11 am service on December 21st. They will be singing the processional hymn and the first lesson and then be dismissed to Children's Church. The choir is open to grades 1-5. Rehearsals will be the first 3 Thursdays of December. Sign up on the app or contact Heidi Mayhew [heidi.mayhew@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:heidi.mayhew@ascensionpittsburgh.org).

# ber!



## St. Nick's Night Market

Sunday, December 7 from 5pm – 8pm

St. Nick's Night Market is an opportunity for our church to celebrate the artists and creators in our congregation while also inviting our neighbors to experience the light of Christ. Art, decorations, books, baked goods, and other homemade items will be for sale. There will also be food trucks, live organ performances, architecture tours of our church, and activities for kids. And of course, it wouldn't be St. Nick's night without St. Nick offering rides in his sleigh for the children! Join us!



## Newcomer Dinner

Thursday, December 11

Join us for a casual dinner at the Coelho's home to learn more about the church and connect with others. Please bring a side dish or dessert to share if you are able, but you are welcome to simply bring yourself, your questions, and your appetite. Families, you are welcome to bring your kids along! Sign up on the web/app! Questions? Email [jess.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:jess.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org).



## International End of Semester Party

Saturday, December 13 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! Plan on bringing your favorite seasonal food.



## Legacy Christmas Luncheon

Thursday, December 18 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 presentation from the Rev. Alex Banfield Hicks, "Prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament." Lunch is \$15. First-timers are free. A registration is available on the app or email [kafisher208@gmail.com](mailto:kafisher208@gmail.com) to let us know you hope to come!

# Finding God in the



By Lauren Scharf, Staff Priest  
[lauren.scharf@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:lauren.scharf@ascensionpittsburgh.org)

*Jesus says to His disciples, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."*  
(Mark 6:31)

## Why Silence?

Silence, prayer, solitude, service, worship, celebration - these are but some of the spiritual disciplines modeled by Jesus and handed down to us by mothers and fathers in the faith. The spiritual disciplines can feel daunting or super spiritual if they are new to you, but, in reality, they are simply tools that aid us in growing in our relationship with God.

I once heard practicing spiritual disciplines compared to seeking sources of water. We don't always know when it will rain or where water will flow - that's not up to us. However, we do know that we are far more likely to find water standing in a riverbed rather than a desert. We know that if we really need water, we ought to go where others have found water in the past.

That is what happens as we practice spiritual disciplines. We choose to put ourselves in postures and places where others have met with God in the past. What God does with us there is entirely up to Him, but we can get ourselves into places where we are likely to hear God more clearly! Put simply, Richard Foster writes, "The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us."

Silence, in particular, is a powerful tool in a world full of noise. In the Gospels we often find Jesus going away to quiet places to pray (Luke 5:15-16, Mark 1:35) and that was before cell phones. And car horns. And Netflix. Imagine how much more we need to seek silence with the Lord now!

## Who Is This For?

Everyone. The Christian spiritual disciplines are for all people who are seeking after (or exploring) a relationship with Jesus. They are not meant only for the spiritual elites or the more contemplative folks among us, but for all of us in our everyday lives. They are simply tools that can help us experience God's active and interested engagement in our lives. The practices of silence and prayer are particularly powerful tools in our noisy, sometimes overwhelming, world filled with distractions.

# Silence



## Ascension Prayer Retreats

One way we are inviting our community to participate in the disciplines of silence and prayer is through our seasonal Ascension Prayer Retreats. These prayer retreats offer a time to experience silence and prayer in the presence of community and with the help of brief reflections to guide our time. We plan to host 4-5 retreats throughout the year, which will help us engage with the different seasons of the church calendar.

### Advent Retreat: Saturday, December 6 from 9 – 11:30am

Our upcoming Advent Retreat, “Prayer as Waiting,” will be on Saturday, December 6th from 9 - 11:30am. We warmly invite you to come for all or part of the morning to experience time with the Lord and the wonderful fellowship that can spring up from being together in silence and prayer. There is no right or wrong way to participate. Nature-loving folks can bring their coats and plan to spend much of the morning outside. If creativity helps you connect with God, then bring art supplies. If this is new to you, but you sense that you want to come and be with the Lord, then just bring yourself - we'll have the coffee!

# Music Ministry



By Josh Bennett, Director of Music & Worship Arts

[josh.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:josh.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org)



**A**dvent is a notable shift in our life together. A shift out of ordinary time (the time following Pentecost) into a season of longing. Longing for Christmas, yes, but even more so, longing for Christ to come again. The design of our service, of our music throughout Advent, is meant to offer us the space to consider and to feel deeply the tension in our souls - the tension we so often seek to numb or distract ourselves from.

Advent is an invitation to slow down, to be honest, to feel deeply.

Several years ago, Jess and I had the privilege of walking with a young man, his wife, and two children as he battled with cancer - cancer that eventually took his life. I still remember trying to sing "O come, O come Emmanuel" with tears streaming down my face as the four of them lit the Advent wreath - as he lifted his frail hands to light this reminder of the hope we have in Christ.

The music, the liturgy, and the season are all meant to give us the space to live in the tension. To live with the hope that Jesus, the Son of God, has come and has saved us and yet we await his coming again. We long for the day that he will return.

This Advent, I pray you may hear the invitation of the Spirit, an invitation to enter in fully to the joy and the grief. Allow the music, what we sing and what is sung and played over you, to draw forth the deep waters of your soul - to acknowledge the pain in light of our hope.

# CAYG this Christmas!



By Daniel Trimble, Director of Youth  
[daniel.trimble@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:daniel.trimble@ascensionpittsburgh.org)

**A**lthough our normal nights of Fall CAYG came to an end on November 23rd, we have several opportunities to celebrate the Advent of Jesus this year.

## Youth Section at the St. Nick's Night Market on December 7th

Our youth are so excited to serve the congregation this year by selling their very own merchandise! Between handmade clothes, baked goods, original art pieces, candles, and more, we are excited to represent CAYG to the congregation and community. Additionally, many of the youth vendors will be selling in order to raise money for our Summer Mission Trip to Niagara Falls in 2026! Please stop by the youth section at the Night Market and see some of the hard work that they've put in.

## CAYG Christmas Party on December 14th

All middle and high school students are welcome to join us on December 14th for our CAYG Christmas Party! Intrinsic to the Yuletide is a season full of celebration, and this year is no different! Join us as we sip hot chocolate, play games, fellowship together, and sing for joy at the coming of our king.



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



By Jess Bennett, Staff Priest  
[jess.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:jess.bennett@ascensionpittsburgh.org)

**A**nother successful Parish Retreat coffee bar! We had a great time hand-brewing some single-origin beans from our friends at Commonplace Coffee and chatting with so many Ascensionites. Some even received an education on Bernoulli's principle by our engineering students while they waited!

Thank you for stopping by and supporting us! Every dollar you spent contributed to our college-age young adults getting to enjoy the Parish Retreat weekend free of charge, which is a real blessing. If you'd like to know about more ways to connect with college students at Ascension, reach out to Jess Bennett.



# Ascension Kids this Advent and Christmas!



By Marilyn Chislaghi, Director of Ministry  
[marilyn.chislaghi@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:marilyn.chislaghi@ascensionpittsburgh.org)

## Advent Resource

We hope that many families in the parish embark on an advent journey with their children! In that spirit, we are providing a resource to families, Ann Voskamp's *Unwrapping the Greatest Gift*. Our hope is that this book would generate daily fruitful conversations in your household about scripture and help prepare your family for Christmas.

Ann Voskamp guides families through making a Jesse Tree by retelling Bible stories with an emphasis on how they foreshadow Jesus. Each short and beautifully illustrated story comes with discussion questions and activities for your family to put into practice what you've learned. Voskamp writes in an engaging way that draws in the reader while maintaining the heart of the stories.

Books and Jesse Tree kits were distributed in November. One per family. If you have yet to pick up yours, please email [katherinefranker@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:katherinefranker@ascensionpittsburgh.org).

## Bake and Give Advent Service Project

Distributed Sundays, December 7 and 14

Parents of children of any age are encouraged to take a Cookie Jar home, bake the cookies together as a family, and deliver them together to an elder member of our church family. The name(s) of the person who is to receive the baked cookies is on the tag. So, in brief: Bake cookies, chat with your kids about the delivery and why it's meaningful and then bring a gift of joy to others in our parish who they may or may not know!

## Christmas Pageant

We invite everyone to attend our Christmas Eve Family Service at 6pm, where children dress in costumes, lead the congregation in singing, and help narrate the story of the birth of Jesus. Costume fittings for the pageant (barnyard animals, shepherds, angels!) will be held on December 14 in the New Catacombs between the 9am and 11am services.



# Learn with us this Epiphany



By Peter Coelho, Rector

[peter.coelho@ascensionpittsburgh.org](mailto:peter.coelho@ascensionpittsburgh.org)

**A**s a church, we are a learning community. We seek to mature and grow as apprentices to Jesus, equipped to follow Him in all of life. One of the ways we learn together is in January-February book groups. We gather in these groups to discuss a specific book or topic and learn and grow together. This year, we're focusing on books that relate to our newly stated values as a church. Check them out below. More information, with specific dates, is coming shortly.

## The Adoration of Jesus

There are two groups related to this value:

- *Who is Jesus?* by Darrell Johnson, led by Jess Bennett and RD Wilkes.
- *Delighting in the Trinity* by Michael Reeves, led by Jayneil Latham-Mason (for youth).

## Biblical Faithfulness

- *The Well That Washes What It Shows: An Invitation to Holy Scripture* by Jonathan Linebaugh, led by Peter Coelho and Jacob Rodriguez.

## The Way of the Cross

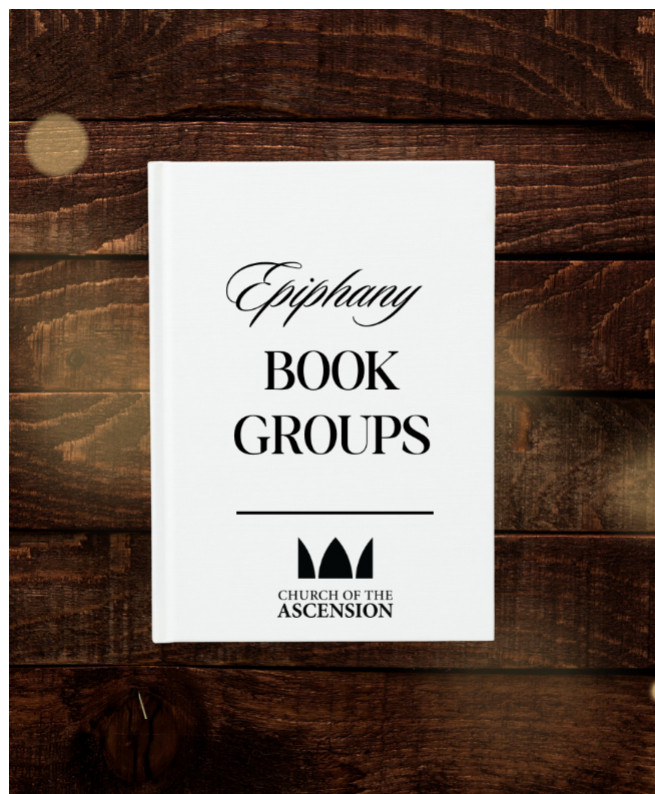
There are two groups related to this value.

- *Practicing Life Together: A Common Rule for Christian Growth* by Paul Gutacker, led by Lauren Scharf.
- *Teach Your Children Well: A Step-by-Step Guide for Family Discipleship* by Sarah Cowan Johnson, led by Aaron and Kelsey Sams.

## The Common Good

There are two groups related to this value:

- *Why Your Work Matters: How God Uses Our Everyday Vocations to Transform Us, Our Neighbors, and the World* by Tom Nelson, led by Brian Janaszek and Jen Hemphill.



- *When Courage Calls: Josephine Butler and the Radical Pursuit of Justice for Women* by Sarah Williams, led by Jill and Eric Shreve.

## Generous Stewardship

- *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* by Marilyn McEntyre, led by Kevin Antlitz and Bonnie Kristian St. Jean.

## An Open Posture

There are two groups related to this value:

- *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship* by John Swinton, led by Katherine Franker & Josh Bennett.
- *Two Stories of Everything: The Competing Metanarratives of Islam and Christianity* by Duane Miller led by Daniel Behrens.

# Refugee Ministry



By Daniel Behrens, Ascension Missionary in Residence

[behrensdg1@gmail.com](mailto:behrensdg1@gmail.com)

**O**n October 10th, Hello Neighbor staff, volunteers, and friends gathered for the “Neighborhood Nosh,” a celebration of immigrant-owned businesses and the ongoing work of welcoming refugees to Pittsburgh. Hello Neighbor CEO and founder Sloane Davidson presented awards to four members of the community who have shown outstanding commitment to making Pittsburgh a city of welcome. I want to share what Sloane said that evening about you (!), Church of the Ascension:

Our final honoree tonight is a faith community that has been a steadfast presence in Pittsburgh for over a century: Church of the Ascension, this year’s Volunteers of the Year.

Since 1889, Church of the Ascension has stood at the corner of Ellsworth and Neville, reflecting Pittsburgh’s history and resilience. For decades, its members have lived out a mission of service - and in recent years, that service has extended to walking alongside some of our city’s newest neighbors.

In 2023, Ascension began partnering with Hello Neighbor through Community Co-Sponsorship, forming groups to walk with five refugee families. This January, they launched a Rapid Response Team, stepping in to provide groceries for families cut off from federal support. Since then, teams of dedicated and trained volunteers have continued to walk with eight households navigating particularly difficult challenges on their path to stability. Beyond their partnership with Hello Neighbor, the church also provides English as a Second Language classes and hosts a weekly immigration legal aid clinic.

We honor Church of the Ascension because they remind us what happens when faith and compassion move into action. Their members haven’t just talked about welcome, they’ve lived it. And in doing so, they’ve strengthened entire neighborhoods across this city.

It was an honor to receive this award along with representatives of our amazing Refugee Ministry Team. I see it as a significant answer to prayer and an affirmation of our





newly-clarified vision of being a community which glories God by contributing to the “healing and renewal of our city and world.” Serving with refugees and other internationals gives us a clear way of living out God’s love. We do this, not ultimately to make Ascension look good, but to show the glory of the God who graciously welcomes us and even now “watches over the sojourners” (Ps. 146:9).

If you are not already serving with refugees or other internationals, I encourage you to find a way to participate! Beyond volunteering directly with the Refugee Ministry and International Ministry, we have seasonal invitations to contribute gift cards for groceries, non-perishable food items, winter clothing and other practical items. Keep an eye on the church website and announcements for current needs, and please reach out to me if you want to learn more!

Thank you for being a church with a reputation for welcoming her neighbors, as we know God welcomes us! If you want to watch the video Hello Neighbor made about Ascension, scan the QR code or visit this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e09jXM6Qzll>



# International Ministry



By LuAnn Pengidore, Director of Ascension International Ministry

[PittsburghEnglish4U@gmail.com](mailto:PittsburghEnglish4U@gmail.com)

**I**f you are a volunteer in the English program or even if you really love chatting with internationals, please join us for the International Holiday Celebration at the end of the fall semester on Saturday, December 13. That's right, a party! It will take place in Bailey Hall from 5:30 - 8:30 pm.

Come enjoy some international foods as we play word games, eat and sing together, enjoy home grown entertainment, create some art, tour the nave, and most of all, get to know the internationals in this program better. You should register on the church app or email me (see above). Why come? Here's a simple example: Luisa and Victor came to the party last year and met Debbie and David Kornfield. They have stayed in relationship with them ever since.

Investing in the lives of internationals truly makes a difference. Mirweis and Zuhal Parsa from Afghanistan recently relocated to Greensburg for Mirweis' job at Seton Hill College. They wrote a goodbye letter to us:

From the very beginning when (Zuhal) was interviewed for English language classes, we were welcomed with such warmth and kindness that we knew that our relationship with the Ascension community would be long lasting. We are always very grateful to the entire community, particularly Jim and Nancy, Judy, Timmy, Barb, Philip and Lola, Mari and Art, and LuAnn for their help, guidance and expressions of kindness throughout our time - in particular, their help with our job searches and their thoughtful letters of recommendation have been crucial in both of our job market successes. Your emotional and physical presence around us during a very critical moment in our lives (the birth of our first child, Atoosa) at a time when we had no family and friends around us was something that we will remember forever. We have shared wonderful moments during Thanksgiving dinners, Bible studies, classes, the baby shower that the community





**International ministry participants and volunteers on a hayride this fall.**

organized for Atoosa, the Christmas parties, birthday celebrations, field trips to farms, and many other gatherings, both at their homes and ours. Last but not the least, we hope to still stay in touch with you. We are just one hour away in Greensburg.

Another family that has returned to Chile wrote this to the church:

My name is Hernan and I am a Catholic and a teacher of philosophy. Yesterday, I attended perhaps my last activity at your Church of the Ascension. I am leaving Pittsburgh on Wednesday, and I am writing to thank you for the time and dedication of many people who supported me during this time, not only teaching me English but inviting us on outings and welcoming us as friends. Thanks to Luann, Pastor Daniel and family, Art, Mary, Gary and so many people that "when I cried out to God in distress, He answered me" as the Psalmist says in Psalm 18. The other day when I passed by your church, I was telling my daughters that I spent more time in this church than in mine! I spoke to her with a tone of sadness and joy. I hope God will provide and bless you and the international student ministry people with what you need. I will always be very grateful to you. As the Psalmist says in another Psalm (126), "But when you go, you go weeping, carrying seeds, but when you return, you come back singing, carrying sheaves."

# Fearfully & Wonderfully Made

By James Scannell

[jscannell2001@gmail.com](mailto:jscannell2001@gmail.com)

*From the editor: For this issue James, a young adult at Ascension who has non-speaking autism and communicates via a spelling board, interviews Mitra Saeidi who attends the 9am service, comes from Iran, and was baptized at Ascension in 2017. Her fascinating story follows!*

**J:** Tell me about how you came to Pittsburgh and to Ascension.

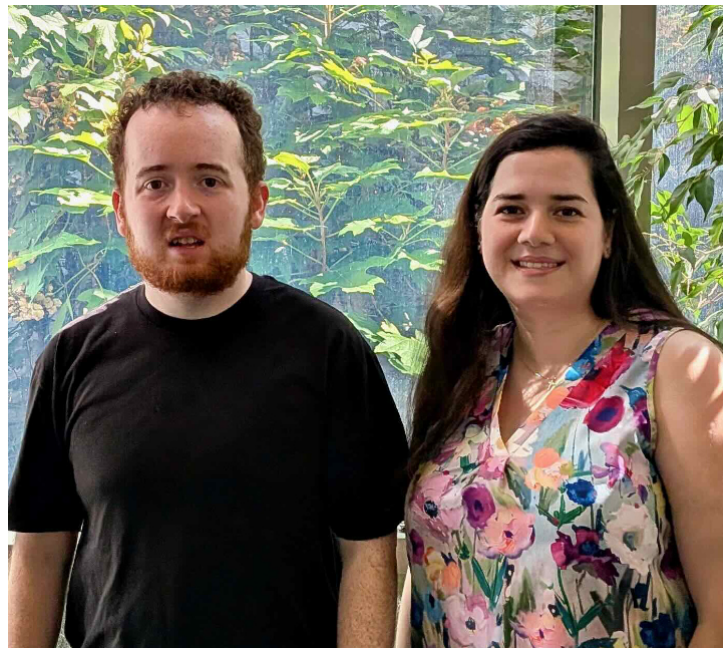
**M:** I came Pittsburgh in September 2016 to visit my sister. I came on a tourist visa and thought I would stay a few months. The very first week when I arrived, I went to University of Pittsburgh English classes. There I saw a poster about English classes at Ascension and found out it was nearby. My sister had heard that the classes in church are really great, so less than a week after I arrived in Pittsburgh, I came to Ascension for English classes.

**J:** What country are you from, and how did you decide to move?

**M:** Iran. It's a very good question. At the start I did not have any plans to stay longer here in the US - my visa was for six months, and I was planning to go back after that. I always was Muslim, I was not Christian there, so I had a curiosity about everything Christian. I had read about Christian Jesus and the prophets, but we didn't learn deeply. After a couple of months, I was just asking some questions and people here were answering me. They were not pushing me or anything, they were just answering my questions. At Christmas 2016 I decided to go to the Christmas service. I hadn't been to a service before. I would say I was amazed a bit at all the stuff that's going on in the service!

I decided I wanted to learn more, and I did. I started reading Bible that time with Denise. I met a couple of times with both Jonathans - Father Millard and Father Warren. We went through the stuff and then after a couple of months I decided I have to convert! While I was Muslim and I was going to Mosque - I went to Mecca and Medina and all of those places, but I didn't have the feeling that I had in the church and in the services.

I knew that with this decision, I couldn't go back to Iran. So, this decision meant that I would have to officially move to the U.S.



**J:** I imagine that decision was hard.

**M:** It was very hard because my decision was equal to not seeing my parents and my brother for a long time. In 2017, there was a travel ban, and I knew it meant that my parents won't come here to visit me.

It was very hard also because I was not packed for coming here and to stay here. I had my sister here which was a very support. She is Muslim and all of my family are Muslims. When I told my parents my decision, they told me, "You are grown now; we are not going to make decision for you. You know better for yourself if you feel better with being a Christian and pray to God that way, it's up to you." But definitely they are going to miss me so very much, but it is what it is. They accepted my decision and I'm glad that they did. Yes, of course it was hard for them too.

**J:** Will they be in trouble because you are a Christian?

**M:** That was very good question. I would say "no". If I'm not going to go back, they won't have any problem. But if I go back, and people figure out what I did, yes. First definitely, I would be in very highest danger.

**J:** So, can we name you in the interview?

**M:** Oh yeah sure, I'm safe here because I'm in the U.S. The U.S. government protect me.

**J:** You gave up home and parents for Jesus. That is costly love.

**M:** I agree, hundred percent I agree.

**J:** Tell me how He has met you.

**M:** The first service I went to the church, I was just surprised because it's so different what I used to. I kept going to services. I remember a sermon where the priest was talking about family and how Jesus bring everyone together, how families are important, friends are important. I don't know what's happened in me. I was sitting with Luann and Denise, and I just thought my eyes - it was just all the crying coming out of my eyes without knowing what's going on. I missed home. I was missing my parents. I was missing my family and my friends, so I was very homesick - and suddenly I felt very relaxed and I'm not missing my family anymore. That was the time I would say I feel Jesus in me, that I met Jesus.

After this, I went to my sister and I told her OK, I think I'm going to convert. I was very quiet at home for a few days (this is very rare for me), and my sister told me maybe I should talk with a pastor or someone I feel comfortable with in the church.

After that, it happened [the feeling of meeting Jesus] a couple of more times to me when I was very down. I like to talk to others, but when I'm in a service, I like to sit by myself - when I'm hearing, thinking, and praying - these are the times that I feel I am meeting Him.

**J:** I feel Him too in the quiet spaces of life, like being outside.

**M:** I agree, it's different for each person.

**J:** What has been challenging for you here in the US?

**M:** I would say I am missing my family, my parents, my brother, my sister-in-law, and my nephew back in Iran. I haven't met him yet - he is 7 and I haven't met him! That's the most challenging part for me.

Also, the asylum process has been difficult. I haven't got my green card yet, but I recently got my travel document which means I can travel outside the US. There's always the worry that the U.S. government will come to me and say OK, there is no reason for you to stay here, you have to leave. I have always been legal, but the process has been hard and challenging.

**J:** How long did it take to get the documents you have so far?

**M:** After I converted, I had to go through the asylum here because I couldn't go back to the country, Hundred percent

could not go back. As I mentioned, if you convert the punishment is death, so definitely I couldn't go back. I had to file for asylum here, so I filed my documents in 2017. I had a big interview on December 2023 and then I got approvals in April 2024 and July 2025. I hope to get my green card later this year. Then I have to wait almost 5 years before I can file for citizenship, so I still have long time ahead of me.

**J:** It sounds so tough.

**M:** It was. It was very tough and with the change of administration again here we don't know what's going to happen. They said that I'm fine because they already approved it and I believe I'll be fine. It would be easier after I get my green card.

**J:** I'm wondering how the church has supported you.

**M:** I would say they support me spiritually. I can come to my friends in church for help. Father Jonathan and Mother Andrea, they helped me a lot - anytime I need them or have a question or problem, I will text her and tell her just pray for me. And of course, LuAnn, Denise, Timmy and Marilyn - I could reach out to them anytime I needed anything. They were really big support. I would call them family. I remember when Father Jonathan was leaving - I told him that you were like father to me and you will be still. I always know that if I need you, I can find you!

**J:** Is there anything else you'd like people to know about yourself or your journey?

**M:** What I really want people to know is that most of the people of Iran are kind and good, and don't want war. The people and the government are not the same.

**J:** I think it's easy to forget that the government and the people are different things. I wanted to say that I'm struck by how Jesus came to you. He is so good and moves among us gently and lovingly.

**M:** Oh, thank you, thank you. Hundred percent I agree, I agree.

**J:** How do you serve here?

**M:** I read and chalice bear at the nine o'clock service. During the recent conflict between Iran and Israel, I did the reading and started crying at the text: "there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free...". People may have wondered, why is she crying up there? It meant so much to me to hear this during a conflict between governments, that we are all one in Jesus.

**J:** I hope you enjoyed this as much as I did. I think you are awesome.



# CHRISTMAS EVE, 12/24 @ 10PM

## FESTIVAL EUCHARIST



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

Website [www.ascensionpittsburgh.org](http://www.ascensionpittsburgh.org)

Address 4729 Ellsworth Avenue Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Phone/Fax (412) 621-4361 / (412) 621-5746

About The Ascent *The Ascent* is published by Church of the Ascension.  
Marilyn Chislighi, Editor  
Kristen Parise, Publisher



**CHURCH OF THE  
ASCENSION**

A growing community of worship  
inviting every generation to encounter  
Jesus and participate in the life of God,  
empowered by the Holy Spirit and  
rooted in the Anglican tradition.