



God's Light is Shining!

Good News from
Three Presbyteries
In the PCUSA



PRESBYTERY *of*
MILWAUKEE



Reflections from Winnebago, Milwaukee,
and John Knox Presbyteries

Epiphany 2024

God's Light is Shining!

Good News from Our Congregations

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world."

As Christians and as Presbyterians we are called to let God's light shine. In the spirit of celebrating regional connections and of letting God's light shine, this devotion has three weeks of reflections from people in the presbyteries of **Milwaukee, John Knox, and Winnebago**—all part of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

We hope these devotions inform and inspire and encourage you. We hope you'll develop a greater awareness of being part of the church local, regional, and universal. We hope you'll sense God's light shining in our congregations, as we seek to make this world a better place.

On January 6, we celebrate Epiphany—God's light shining in the world. The scripture encourages us:

"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you." Isaiah 60:1-2 NRSV

This resource has six reflections from each of the three presbyteries, a different one each day of the week, for three weeks. Sunday readings include scripture and Book of Order references. Over the three weeks from January 7 through January 27, we invite you to spend a few minutes each day to:

- Read scripture and learn about a congregation or ministry in our area
- Pray for that congregation, for our presbyteries, and the Presbyterian Church (USA)
- Ponder how you and your congregation can let God's light shine

This devotion arose from conversations among leaders in the three presbyteries, as we ponder ways of collaborating on our common ministry. May God's light show us the way.

Grace and peace,

Winnebago	Milwaukee	John Knox
Sue Buck	David Ewing	Scott Anderson
Dan Crump	Teresa Larsen	Charlie Berthoud
Matt Sauer	Bill Leonard	Laurie Jones
Rachel Wann	Kent Tess-Mattner	Loren Shellabarger

Sunday, January 7

SCRIPTURE: So John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Mark 1:4-11

BOOK of ORDER:

The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission. (F-1.01)

Monday, January 8 WINNEBAGO

SCRIPTURE "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" Matthew 25:34-40 NIV



GOOD NEWS Along with two other Presbyterian churches in the area, First Presbyterian Church of Green Bay provides food through the Presbyterian Food Pantry of Green Bay to our neighbors with hunger issues. The Pantry, housed at First Presbyterian Church, has become a stand-alone 501(c)3 charity and is able to accept monetary donations, as well as food from any source.



Currently, there are four partners, Breadsmith, Feeding America, Red Lobster, and Schreiber Foods, who provide ongoing donations to the Pantry. The Pantry Board and other Pantry volunteers are committed to assisting the effort by providing the space required as well as monetary assistance.

Due to the current economic conditions, the number of families coming to the Pantry has increased over past months. First Presbyterian Church is committed to help feed those who are in need of food. During one Pantry day in December, a Toy Shop is available. Toys are provided by donations from the participating congregations.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You pour out your blessings on us every day and we are thankful for your love and devotion. Knowing that you call on us to assist others, we thank you for the opportunity to serve our community by providing food and fellowship for our neighbors in need.

We know that by giving them something to eat, we are doing your work in the world. Through that work, we share your word and your love to those we touch. Amen



Tuesday, January 9 MILWAUKEE

SCRIPTURE: Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”
Matthew 22:37-40

GOOD NEWS: Grace Presbyterian in Milwaukee is an historic church, with a small, elderly congregation and a big heart. It was established in 1872 originally under the name Bethany Presbyterian Church in the Bay View neighborhood as a mission of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Milwaukee. It

nurtured the founding of Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church in the Bay View neighborhood of Milwaukee in 1913. Worship, Christian Education, various programs, community services and mission support were abundant throughout the 20th century. Membership after WWII was 272 members. By the 1970s, there were 324 members, which declined to 116 members in 1997, and is currently 52 members. Since their most recent installed pastor retired in 2022, they have hired a full-time interim pastor to explore their future. Half of their annual budget is committed to missions in the community, throughout the PCUSA and internationally.

PRAYER: Please pray for this congregation's stamina, creativity, flexibility, adaptivity and the love they share with this world.

Wednesday, January 10
JOHN KNOX

SCRIPTURE: Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. Philippians 1:3-6

GOOD NEWS: What a joy it has been to be on this journey of faith with First Presbyterian Church in Lancaster Wisconsin. Located in the beautiful southwest corner of the state First Pres is in the hills and valleys which lead to the Mississippi river. 2023 has been a year of growth of new ministries and continued celebrations of traditions that were postponed for the past few years. In 2023, we decided to return to Christmas Eve Worship in the Barn for our community and we also returned to the ministry of serving our community with Whole Hog Sausage and Pancake Supper, in which we fed 1,000+ people. Our Wednesday night bible school has been growing with 60+ kids who have the opportunity to hear that God loves them and has a purpose for their life! Many of these children come from families that are not active in the life of the church. We praise God for the teachers and volunteer parents who serve in this ministry. There are still men's prayer groups, Presbyterian Women Bible Study, a "Mom's Bible Study" group as well as many other small group gatherings. We also returned to the high school Mission Trip this year and traveled to Tennessee. The 40+ kids had an opportunity to serve and visited the Noah's Ark Replication and museum. Our ministry to feeding those in need also continued through the food pantry and Badger Box giveaway in 2023. These ministries give us cause to celebrate being a vehicle of grace for the Light of The World, Jesus the Christ!

Prayer: Dear Lord, we pray that First Presbyterian Church and the churches of our Presbyteries would be a vehicle of grace, through which, God changes the human heart and reaches a hurting world. Help our church's to be the front-line agents for God's gathered and scattered ministries. Drawn by the Spirit to gather each week for worship, care, and fellowship; help our members to be then sent out to discover where God is at work outside of the church. Help us to be called to make God's love real in the places we live, work, and play. We pray this all in the name which is above all names, Jesus Christ. (This prayer is adapted from the John Knox Vision Statement created many years ago.)

Thursday, January 11
WINNEBAGO

SCRIPTURE: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”
The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.
Lamentations 3:22-25

GOOD NEWS: First Presbyterian Church of Arpin was established in 1904 with 15 charter members. A new building was ready to receive members in 1917. We then expanded in 1997.

In recent years, members have sewn hundreds of dresses and shorts for children in Africa. Two of our congregants recently served on a mission trip to Ghana, and two members are raising funds, preparing to serve the community in Aworowa, Ghana in January, 2024.

Our worship services are led by CRE Jess Wakefield, supplemented by faith leaders from the area when Jess is unavailable. Often, we have as many children gathering for worship as adults, considerably adding to the joy of the service.



We hold Vacation Bible School each summer, and hold Sunday School services during the school year. We administer and supply a 24/7 free food pantry at the church, deliver Christmas baskets of food during the holiday, and contribute generously to Crop Walk. During the harvest season, we maintained a vegetable and food exchange. We also contribute to the personal hygiene program at the Auburndale schools. We are a small but vibrant church with close connections to and concerns for each other and beyond.

PRAYER: Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, as he works among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever. Amen. Hebrews 13: 20-21

Friday, January 12
MILWAUKEE

Immanuel Presbyterian Church in downtown Milwaukee marks its 187th anniversary in 2024. Today's congregation of over 500 members comes from next door, neighborhoods throughout the city, and extends across the country through our livestream worship services. Committed to "transforming tradition" and "keeping faith in the city," Immanuel actively supports mission efforts in the city and well beyond.

One of the ways that Immanuel Church "transforms tradition" each year is through the production of an Advent booklet, with reflections written by members and friends. The theme for last Advent's booklet was "A Thrill of Hope, the Weary World Rejoices". Below is a reflection on hope from Elder Sue Rennane, Clerk of Session.

A black-capped chickadee greets me most mornings as I fill the birdfeeder. With a song of hope, 'Chick-a-dee-dee-dee', he awaits me. I fill the feeder and then, oh then, there is a fluttering and chirping that takes place that can only be described as gratitude. This is like when I get out my car keys and our dog stares at me with those beautiful puppy eyes of hope. I look at her and say, "Yes", and then comes the bounding and circling of gratitude, because she loves to ride in the car. And there is the hope in my granddaughter's eyes when she asks, "Grandma, can we have hot dogs for lunch?" I say, "Yes," and the whoops and hollers of gratitude ensue.

Now those are 'little' hopes, I will call them. I see their hope, I react (an action), and then I see gratitude. I thought about how this idea might apply to 'big' hopes. That night I saw hope in the eyes of the families of hostages in Gaza. I heard Lester Holt of NBC News appreciate their hope and recognize it as real. Then I heard their 'thank you', their gratitude for his consideration. I thought about the hope my friend expressed that her medical tests would be positive. I addressed her hope and told her I would walk with her through this journey and saw her calm down. I saw hope in an Immanuel friend's eyes as she voiced her thoughts about transitions in the church. I reacted to her hope and saw gratitude when I said, "We the church will be here strong as ever."

For the 'big' hopes, just like the 'little' hopes, there is seeing the hope, acknowledging the hope and then there is gratitude. The acknowledgement is a small action, but holding a hand, listening, or walking with the person helps to make the hope real, I think, which allows gratitude to filter in.

*"By gracious powers so faithfully protected,
so quietly, so wonderfully near,
I'll live each day in hope, with You beside me,
and go with You through ev'ry coming year."
"New Year 1945" Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

Saturday, January 13
JOHN KNOX

SCRIPTURE: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; Do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43:18-19)

GOOD NEWS: For many years adult and youth teams from First Presbyterian Church traveled from La Crosse, WI to Haiti. We served multiple communities around Les Cayes – and experienced many joys, challenges, and questions – as well as the need to depend on God unlike how we perceive that need when we are in our own country/comfort zone.

We offered remote medical clinics, taught Bible school for over 600 children, helped facilitate 25 weddings in one week, complete with wedding attire, photographs and a community reception. Our doctors gallantly offered medical care, often outside of their expertise, in primitive conditions. We developed friendships with our Haitian brothers and sisters.

I (we) loved a mission.

On August 21st, 2021, Haiti was devastated by an earthquake of 7.2 on the Richter scale. Coupled with the rise of gang violence and the inability of the government to contain it, the missionaries with whom we worked for over 15 years had no viable option but to discontinue their work and return to their home country.

I (we) loved a mission that now ceased to exist.

This caused me to consider some other missions that had run their course in the life of our church: Marathon ministry weekend, housing women who were exiting from abusive relationships, offering our space to a new and growing Chinese church, supporting cottage industry through our annual Ten Thousand Villages sale, our World Kitchen project and others.

I (we) need to love new missions and ministries that are right before us.

PRAY: Let’s keep our eyes and hearts wide open, and pray for creativity and vision – to see what God is doing in our midst, and the opportunities that God places before us to minister in new and imaginative ways – so that we might meet the changing needs around us.



Sunday, January 14

SCRIPTURE: The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." John 1:43-51

BOOK of ORDER The presbyterian form of government set forth in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is grounded in Scripture and built around the marks of the true Church. It is in all things subject to the Lord of the Church. In the power of the Spirit, Jesus Christ draws worshiping communities and individual believers into the sovereign activity of the triune God at all times and places. As the Church seeks reform and fresh direction, it looks to Jesus Christ who goes ahead of us and calls us to follow him. United with Christ in the power of the Spirit, the Church seeks "not [to] be conformed to this world, but [to] be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). F-1.0401

Monday, January 15 WINNEBAGO

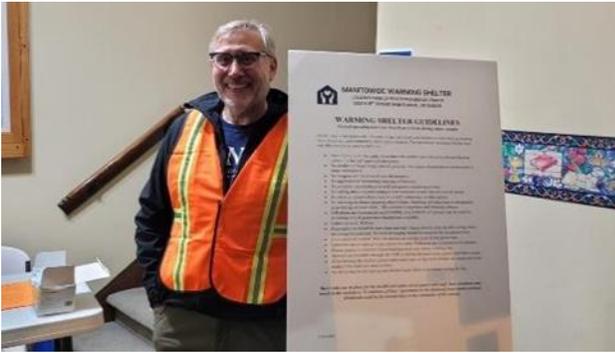
SCRIPTURE: *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy."*
--1 Peter 2:9-10

GOOD NEWS: In November of 2021 the Councils of Manitowoc Cooperative Ministry (an innovative ministry of Peace UCC and First Presbyterian Church both in Manitowoc, WI) were convicted that something had to be done for the homeless in their midst. The community served by two wonderful program-based shelters but there were no lower-barrier drop-in shelters to keep folk from freezing to death at night.



Manitowoc
WARMING
SHELTER

By November 2022 the Manitowoc County Warming Shelter was open in the Community Hall of First Presbyterian Church. The Warming Shelter is truly a community project involving over 100



volunteers from all over the community. The Warming Shelter opened for its second season in November of 2023 with even more volunteers and donations from the community. In the harsh cold of Winter, the Warming shelter provides the warmth, hope, and compassion of God's light. Many believe those that live is homeless are not fully people, but we know they are God's people, some will say they do not deserve mercy, but we know they have already received the mercy of God.

Warming Shelter facts from the 2023-24 Season

- 53 individuals served
- 123 volunteers + organizations and businesses
- 88% occupancy rate
- \$40,000 raised for expenses and to start a fund for a permanent location

PRAYER: Sheltering God, we pray for all those who live in homelessness and struggle to find a warm and safe place to sleep each night. We pray for those in positions of power that they may live out the Gospel of compassion for those who live in poverty. We give thanks for those who volunteer their time and resources to serve all you people. We pray for the Manitowoc Warming Shelter may it a place of your warmth, hope, and love this winter season. AMEN!



Tuesday, January 16 **MILWAUKEE PRESBYTERY**

SCRIPTURE: They came to the edge of the village where they were headed. Jesus acted as if he were going on but they pressed him: "Stay and have supper with us. It's nearly evening; the day is done." So he went in with them. And here is what happened: He sat down at the table with them. Taking the bread, he blessed and broke and gave it to them. At that moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, they recognized him. And then he disappeared. Back and forth they talked. "Didn't we feel on fire as he conversed with us on the road, as he opened up the Scriptures for us? Luke 24:28-32
The Message

GOOD NEWS Imagine the moments when a conversation inspired you, left you feeling on fire. We believe the good news does this. Tables appear throughout Jesus' ministry. At some, he is a welcome guest. At others, people wish he would leave. Every time, Jesus invites everyone to God's table where each person is seen as a child of God, beautiful and valuable because of who they are.

At Kairos Collective, we strive to gather around a table open to all. We hope people “feel on fire” so that dinner together is just the beginning. We want to live lives deeply understanding the value of each and every person, which means taking actions of mercy and justice. We are not there yet.

Since 2021, we gather monthly for a meal, to pray together, and to perform acts of service, mercy or justice. We hope to collectively live the Jesus way deeply so all of us are transformed by Jesus’ call to love God, ourselves and our neighbor.

PRAYER: Lord, we ask that you challenge us to live your love fully each day. To live into the uncomfortable spaces, to be quick to listen and slow to speak, to be curious and to share boldly. We ask for the courage to be vulnerable and open. We wish to live lives “on fire” with your love. Amen

Wednesday, January 17
John Knox

SCRIPTURE:

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth
and thick darkness the peoples,
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Isaiah 60:1-3

Epiphany is my favorite liturgical season. To me, the season of Epiphany is profoundly beautiful because of its focus on light, revelation, wisdom, and the sometimes-arduous journey it takes for Good News to get from our heads to our hearts.

In many ways the season of Epiphany is a metaphor for the Church. Churches begins with a revelation of God with us then the wise people of the church journey to seek out Christ Jesus wherever he may be found. Along the way they are led by the light of Christ learning, growing, and seeking only to pay homage to the one for whom the light shines.

For our Church in Winona Minnesota the journey began in 1952 when First Presbyterian Church (1856) and Bethel German Presbyterian Church (1866) united to form Grace Presbyterian. The building on the corner of 5th and Franklin proved to be too small to house the rising numbers so the church purchased some land only a block away and began building a new permanent home at



222 E. Broadway in 1956. Ten years later a manse was built to house future Pastors and in 1971 Grace Presbyterian Church paid their last bill to the Presbytery effectively ending their Mission Church status. Most recently in 1994 an addition to the church was added to have space for offices on site.

Although the building is an important part of the journey, as was the tabernacle to the ancient Israelites, the building does not make the church; the people do. Over that time Grace Presbyterian Church has had years of plenty and of want but the congregation has remained committed to being church together. It is a source of pride here that in the late 1950s church bills were posted on the bulletin board to be taken home by members to be paid anonymously. In the last 6 years the people of Grace Presbyterian Church have continued to prove their love and faithfulness to being a church family as well as to being a church to this community. We continue to host AA groups every day of the week, multi-denominational women's bible study, Lions Club, and help our community through supporting our local food shelf and crisis help center. But most importantly, GPC has made a commitment to serve our community in partnership with churches of other denominations. One example of this partnership is our participation in the RIP medical debt campaign in 2020 that forgave over 2 million dollars of medical debt for folks all over Minnesota and Wisconsin. All of which strikes me as a rather epiphany-esque thing to do.

The magi were not Jews, their journey to worship and honor the newborn King of the Jews was a foreshadowing of Christ's inclusion of the gentiles in the salvific work of his life, death, and resurrection. This inclusion is paramount to what we believe about Christ, and about our mission as Christians. I think that all churches can often forget that we are not the only ones following the light of Christ as we get bogged down in our forms of governance, doctrinal beliefs, and the day to day of our individual church families. We forget that there are many on this same journey, and we do not just follow the light of Christ but reflect Christ's light for all to see. We all become beacons of the light, bringing it further into the world like a signal fire that burns with hope rather than warning.

Though our little Grace Presbyterian church continues to make financial leaps of faith, and it is often threatened that bills may end up posted on the bulletin board again, the people here are committed to continuing the journey. We do that in all the ways we follow the light of Christ and reflect it back into our community. Christ Jesus is Lord of all, and no matter the struggles small churches face in this post-covid world of darkness – the light of the Lord is upon us, and his glory shines over us. May this revelation be made clear to you this epiphany season.

PRAYER Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, for you are the God of the journey and the light that guides our way. May we continue to be led by your light, and may your love, grace, and charity shine brightly through all the churches that love and serve you. Help us, God of Glory, to recognize the epiphanies you have revealed to us this year as we serve your people in this world. Amen.

Thursday, January 18
WINNEBAGO PRESBYTERY

SCRIPTURE: *“As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.”* Matthew 10:7-8, NRSV

GOOD NEWS: In 2017 a local physician, Dr. Jeff Oswald, came to FPC with the vision of opening a free medical clinic in Wausau, and he wondered if we would be interested in hosting it. With the enthusiastic support of the Session, we said yes, and the amazing, if sometimes bumpy, journey toward realizing the dream began.



In 2018, the Wausau Free Clinic of First Presbyterian Church opened in partnership with the Catholic Charities Warming Center and began to provide free medical care one night per week to anyone who needed it. That same year, we were invited to become a charter member of the Community Partners Campus, which would provide space for multiple community service organizations within one location.

The Campus was completed in 2023, and the Free Clinic moved into its new home. With this amazing space, multiple volunteer medical providers, in-kind radiology services at local hospitals, in-house testing, and multiple prescription drugs on hand, the Clinic provides free urgent and ongoing medical care to low income, uninsured, and underinsured persons in Marathon County.

PRAYER: God of Healing and Wholeness, this day we pray for all people who do not have access to basic and preventative health care. We long for a time when universal health care is available to all persons. We pray that our legislators will come to acknowledge that wellness is a right for all, not simply a privilege for a few. Thank you for the medical personnel and support volunteers who freely are giving of their time and talents to assist those who desperately need it. Amen.

Friday, January 19
MILWAUKEE PRESBYTERY

SCRIPTURE: For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity.”

--Jeremiah 29:11-14

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

--Matthew 25:35-36

GOOD NEWS: Like so many churches across the country, Linn finds itself in a time of transition. And as with all transitions, there are ups and downs, good times and challenging times. But like the Israelites in the letter from Jeremiah, we continue to hold fast to promise of God and live out God’s plan for us in the time and place which we find ourselves. As a Matthew 25 congregation, Linn continues with myriad efforts to combat poverty and homelessness in our local community.



We work with local schools and homeless shelters to provide back to school supplies to students.

At Thanksgiving, in coordination with the school districts, meals are provided to families in need.

The Deacons Christmas drive delivers food to the table and presents under the tree of families that would otherwise go without. Our biannual rummage sales offer the community inexpensive clothing, household items, and anything else one can imagine, with a portion of proceeds going back into the community (past recipients have included homeless shelters, food pantries, and diaper banks). Community gardens allow people a place to feed their passion for gardening while feeding the congregation and community with extra produce. A GriefShare program meets in the church and offers a safe place for community members to work through some of life’s most difficult moments.

So, while Linn continues to discern God’s plan and vision for our future, we continue to cling to the certainty that God has big plans in store for us; plans for us to prosper. And in the meantime, we spread the light of God and love of Jesus throughout our community.

PRAYER: Faithful God, thank you for your promises. We take comfort knowing that you have great plans for us, even if we aren't there yet. We rejoice in your faithfulness and abundance, sharing the good things you have given us with our community.

May you continue to push us to do for the most in need among us that which we would do for You.
Amen



Saturday, January 20
JOHN KNOX

SCRIPTURE: “I assure you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it can only be a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit.” John 12:24

GOOD NEWS: On March 3, 1849, a missionary, Rev. Dr. William Cargen, M.D. and a small group of Presbyterians under the then Wisconsin Presbytery, established a new church on the banks of Lake Ripley on land that was the sacred home to the Ho Chunk people .



On March 3, 2024, Oakland-Cambridge Presbyterian Church will be celebrating its 175th Anniversary. A celebration will take place on June 22, 2024 in the cemetery where the original church was established.

Sadly, there will be no 200th Anniversary, and maybe not even a 180th. Like so many of our congregations, OCPC is aging and worship attendance is on the decline. A once thriving congregation served by full-time pastors, they are now served by a part-time minister. However, we are not without hope for a future. In this time of uncertainty, many congregations and our presbyteries are exploring creative new ways to be the Body of Christ.

In our geographical area there are two other congregations, an ELCA Lutheran Church (Rockdale) and a Moravian Church (London). Early in 2023, we began some conversations together about ways all three congregations might come together to strengthen our common ministry and mission.



As the we began the conversations, one of the Elders at OCPC said if our church closed, he and his wife would not join another church. Several weeks later, he had an epiphany. After reflecting on the reason they had originally joined the church, he said he had changed his mind. He realized it was about the relationships that had helped them through some life challenges, and the love of Christ they had felt in them. If we could come together, getting to know each other, we could build new relationships which would see us into a future unimagined.

He even came up with a name for the ministry of all three congregations: “Koshkonong Creek Collective”, suggesting we create a new sign to be placed in front of each church with the common ministry name on it and all three denominational logos.

To that end, we came together on World Communion Sunday 2023 with London Moravian to hosting our first joint worship service, complete with a Blessing of the Animals. In December 2023, we held two combined worship services, one at Rockdale Lutheran who hosted an Advent workshop following worship, the other at Oakland Cambridge Presbyterian which was a festive Advent/Christmas music service with each congregation sharing their musical talents.

In this season of Epiphany, when Jesus was discovering more of who he was and the shape of his ministry, we too are trusting the Spirit to reveal to us who we are being called to be as together as Christ’s Body, the Church.

PRAYER O God our help in ages past, you are our hope for years to come. While we grieve what has been for so long our understanding of what it has meant to be your Church, we also cling to the promise of resurrection and new life. May we trust in our dying, we will, through Your Spirit, rise to new life and ways of being the Resurrected Body of Christ together. Amen.

Sunday, January 21

SCRIPTURE: Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. Mark 1:14-20

BOOK of ORDER: Unity is God’s gift to the Church in Jesus Christ. Just as God is one God and Jesus Christ is our one Savior, so the Church is one because it belongs to its one Lord, Jesus Christ. The Church seeks to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone. There is one Church, for there is one Spirit, one hope, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5–6). Because in Christ the Church is one, it strives to be one. To be one with Christ is to be joined with all those whom Christ calls into relationship with him. To be thus joined with one another is to become priests for one another, praying for the world and for one another and sharing the various gifts God has given to each Christian for the benefit of the whole community. Division into different denominations obscures but does not destroy unity in Christ. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), affirming its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to the reduction of that obscurity, and is willing to seek and to deepen communion with all other churches within the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. F-1.0302

Monday, January 22
WINNEBAGO PRESBYTERY

SCRIPTURE: Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power; put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.
--Ephesians 6:10-12

GOOD NEWS: Covenant Community Presbyterian Church in Schofield, WI, hosted their third Anti-Human Trafficking seminar on Saturday, October 21. Speakers included representatives from local and state-wide anti-trafficking ministries, as well as the WI State patrol. Attendees were trained on the realities and warning signs of trafficking, and learned about efforts to assist in recovery for those rescued locally. Six other congregations in our Presbytery live-streamed the event and hosted their own discussion groups. After the training, teams were sent from CCPC to gas stations, hotels and motels in Marathon and Lincoln Counties, to offer training and materials to those employees who might be best placed to notice and report when trafficking occurs.



Human trafficking is an evil that Christ calls us to combat and overcome; it is unquestionably part of “this present darkness.” As Jesus is not an ambivalent God, so too we are called to more than an abivalent church. We are called to defend the weak and rescue the oppressed, so that justice might roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

PRAYER: Mighty Father, you sent your Son to establish your kingdom on earth, invading the cosmic powers of this present darkness with the Light of the World. Grant us the privilege to partner with him in the shining of light in dark places, so that your kingdom might come more fully on earth, as it is already in heaven.

Tuesday, January 23
MILWAUKEE

SCRIPTURE: We have many parts in one body, but the parts don’t all have the same function. In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other. We have different gifts that are consistent with God’s grace that has been given to us. Romans 12:4-6a

GOOD NEWS: At our quarterly gathering in November, the presbytery of Milwaukee celebrated the many ways congregational vitality is growing. We’ve highlighted each of the 7 Marks of Vitality at our gatherings over the past 2 years and November was the time to show how they are being lived out. Our worship interwove PCUSA prayers for congregational vitality with scripture, song, and a word from PCUSA Associate Rev. Tony Oltmann. Workshops went deeper into Tony’s work, described Food for the Journey – a multi-church garden and food distribution project, and showed how evangelism can be done by Sharing Good News as We Dismantle Structural Racism. Throughout the day, a Vitality Fair was going on where churches displayed their initiatives and, more importantly, dialoged with people from other congregations on how they did what they did.



What we saw, especially at the Fair, is that congregational vitality can grow in churches of any size. It’s not about numbers, but discovering the gifts of the Spirit already among you and putting them to work. The initiatives shared weren’t large, expensive projects. They were inspired by the needs in a community, carried out by members and friends called to serve.

We all have abilities and gifts that God has given us. Christ’s body is in need of each and everyone. What is your giftedness? How can you live into your gifts to share the love of God in Jesus Christ with those around you and to bring the vital presence of God into your congregation?

PRAYER: Living God, by the gifts of your Spirit, help us to bear witness to the risen Lord: proclaiming the good news of salvation, growing in the image of Christ, offering your grace to others, sharing the hope that is within us, loving and serving one another, extending your compassion to all, building up the body of Christ. Living God, in the great mystery of our faith, receive us each night and revive us each day, that we may be dead to sin and alive to you; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen

Wednesday, January 24
JOHN KNOX

SCRIPTURE: Jesus said, “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on a path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” Mark 4:3-9

GOOD NEWS: Several members of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Madison have taken seminary-level classes through the Madison Learning Community, an outreach of the Dubuque Theological Seminary. After the preaching class in spring 2023, we had a summer sermon series called “God News From the Pews” with six different members offering sermons. The sermons were deep and rich, and they were well-received.



Titles of the sermons included:

- Redeeming Jezebel
- The Esther Moment
- The Church that Encourages and Builds Up Each Other

Several of these members are now on the presbytery pulpit supply list, sharing God’s word in congregations without installed pastors. We are grateful for the way that God’s word is taking new roots and growing in new ways.

PRAYER: Loving God, thank you for the gift of your word; we thank you that Jesus is the word made flesh. May your word take deeper root in our hearts and homes, our churches and our presbyteries, so that we may more faithfully live as your people. Amen.

Thursday, January 25
WINNEBAGO

SCRIPTURE Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-16, NRSV)

GOOD NEWS: WINNEBAGO PRESBYTERY includes 28 congregations and roughly four thousand Presbyterians in northeast Wisconsin. We have embraced the use of technology to stay connected to one another and to be effective and efficient in doing the regional work of the church. Hybrid Presbytery meetings enable some to meet in person and experience the benefits of conversation and informal interactions while allowing others to participate fully in a meeting but avoid travel time due to other ministry or personal obligations. If meetings were all-or-nothing, we believe people whose experiences and faith are important would not be able to attend and help shape our decision-making in faithful ways.

But sometimes a drive is required and it matters to be in person. I remember one drive on a snowy blustery night, driving from one church meeting to a next. January in Wisconsin can be difficult. And we long for light.

In this case, as I was driving with white knuckles on a road that was getting covered with snow. Praying with my eyes open for a safe arrival. And I was so relieved to finally arrive at that church, and there it was ablaze with light. It meant a safe arrival and the literal end of that particular journey. But it also represented the hospitality that was offered, and a desire to learn and ask questions about the future together, and an opportunity to grow into the future.



PRAYER Let your light shine, Holy God. And may your light shine through us and through our congregations. May we offer hospitality to those in need and may our fellowship offer courage and companions for our journeys.

Friday, January 26
MILWAUKEE

SCRIPTURE: “Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way.’” Matt 15:32

GOOD NEWS: One of Sun Valley’s great events of the year is our annual Strawberry Fest. Offered many years ago, we recreated the Fest in 2009 as a way to have fun with our neighbors and to earn funding for our favorite benevolences. The Fest offers breakfast, lunch, desserts, crafters, a children’s carnival, live music, raffle baskets, and more.

When the pandemic hit, we had to shut down, not just the church, but our Fest as well. We knew, however, that hungry and homeless people were still hungry and homeless. In Beloit, this is a major issue that a number of churches and organizations, the school district, and our city gov’t have been working on for some time. So, we got creative. We created a drive-thru lunch and offered a special Strawberry Fest menu. With a few extra donations, we provided important funding in 2020 despite the pandemic.

Today, we are back to the full Fest with all of its features. This past summer, we hosted the best Fest yet...Over 300 breakfasts, 25 crafters, 30 plus raffle baskets, the dessert tent with lines, and a nearly sold out lunch tent. After, Sun Valley paid our PC(USA) mission pledge with great joy. Then we invited our four favorite local benevolences to celebrate with us during worship. They each received our largest donations to date, also with great joy!



Jesus said, “I have compassion for them,” and with that, he fed a crowd the size of a hill with just seven loaves and a few fish. It’s amazing what we can do with just a few resources and a lot of Christ’s compassion. It’s amazing what we can do when we face extreme adversity. We are at a time in the life of the church, our church and many churches, when we have fewer resources even though there remain many hungry and homeless people. And people with other issues, too. Yet, our creativity coupled with Jesus’ compassion opens the door to greater ministry. May God continue to work through us at Strawberry Fest and in all of our ministries.

PRAYER: Dear God, bring your Spirit upon this world once more. As we enter a new year, show us the possibilities of your compassion. Help us to see our neighbors, to hear our neighbors, and to feed our neighbors, especially with your love. In Christ’s name, Amen.

Saturday, January 20
JOHN KNOX

SCRIPTURE: “What God is interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families.” (Isaiah 58:7, adapted)



Peace Presbyterian Church in Mauston, Wisconsin, is a 37-member community of faith and the only Presbyterian presence in Juneau County. They receive all four Presbyterian special offerings and the Session designates a recipient for the local portions of both the Pentecost Offering and the Peace and Global Witness Offering. This year’s local portions were combined to become \$183 looking for a good cause to support. One of the critical issues in Mauston is school children who risk falling through the cracks because their school lunch account has fallen to or below zero. Hungry students do not learn at the same rate as others. Affected students may only be able to get a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch. There are a number of reasons lunch accounts run out of money or are not replenished but none of them are the fault of the student. This year, the Session is donating the entire amount to the Mauston School District. It will be used to put money back into lunch accounts for as many students as possible. It’s one more example of how Peace Presbyterian Church is living into its mission statement. “With God’s help, we make a difference by following Jesus’ example, nurturing spiritual growth and reaching out to others.”

PRAYER: Wonderful God, you encourage us to share the blessings we’ve received. Continue to lead us to ministries that share your love with others, that all may have enough. Amen.

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Thank you for taking time to reflect on our common ministry over these three weeks. Please continue to pray for one another and keep your eyes open for GOOD NEWS in our churches, community, and world!