



ST. STEPHEN THIS WEEK

St. Stephen Lutheran Church Newsletter

LET’S TALK

Please mark your calendar for this Sunday, Feb. 2. We’ll have a congregational meeting in the sanctuary shortly after worship ends. At the meeting we’ll elect new members to Church Council, go through the financial report from 2024 and vote on the budget for 2025. Pastor Tom isn’t tying in a detailed open forum with breakout groups this time, but he will ask the congregation to pray about God’s plan to utilize our building space for new ministries. See you there.



‘EVEN WHEN IT FEELS LIKE WE’RE RUNNING UPHILL’: A SPECIAL MESSAGE ABOUT NOT LOSING HOPE

Jonathan Webber, the Florida policy director for the Southern Poverty Law Center, provided St. Stephen with a pep talk for keeping hope alive during Sunday’s annual Ministry of Reconciliation celebration. Jonathan, who lives in Tallahassee with his wife and son, titled his keynote address “The Politics of Possibility: Inspiring Hope in Times of Challenge.”



He began by citing the example of the Legislature considering the funding of food assistance for children during the 2024 summer break. You’d think this would be an obviously compassionate and moral action to take, he said. In fact, thanks in part to advocacy by the SPLC and its allies, the Legislature did indeed approve the funding. However, the state executive branch failed to follow through. It didn’t activate the federal funding. That heartbreaking example, he said, illustrates the frustration that advocates can experience.

But, he insisted, there’s always hope. “We must keep going,” he said. “And we will. We’re doing it again this year. We’re coming back, and we’re going to force the issue. We’re not giving up. Success is attainable, and we’re going to make sure that the executive branch cannot just ignore it.” Or at least they’re going to try.

Apart from that example, of course, are plenty of opportunities every day to lose hope – especially if you’re keeping up with the news. “It requires us to keep doing the work even when it feels like we’re running uphill...,” he said. “Hope is found in the work that we do, no matter how difficult, no matter how long it takes.”

It’s tempting to give up, to close our eyes and ears and hearts to the injustices around us. It can be overwhelming. And, yes, sometimes even Jonathan has to tune it out for a while. But not for long. “This larger struggle is nothing new,” he said. “Throughout history we’ve seen political strife and injustice and leadership failures.” And yet, through it all, some people refuse to give up. “Hope is pushing back against leaders who weaponize our collective suffering to divide us,” he said. “To force us to pick sides. To make us feel like we’ve lost something that rightfully belongs to us. The truth is, the only thing they want to take away from you is your hope, your ability to imagine a better future.”

He told of the countless times the Southern Poverty Law Center and its allies had summoned the strength to challenge unfair legislation – regarding voting rights, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and other issues – even when they knew their opposition had no chance of succeeding. So why bother? “That’s where hope and advocacy meet,” he said. “Because as civil-rights advocates, we fight not just for the moment that we’re in, but for the moment to come. Hope is not just about the here and now. It’s about creating a better future – even when, and especially when, it feels impossible at the moment.”

He continued: “The torch of hope doesn’t get extinguished and relit when it’s convenient. It’s handed down from one generation to the next.... Belief in a better tomorrow is part of who we are. It’s ingrained in us.... Hope is the constant struggle against despair. You have the option to seek out the hopeful in your life.... You can become that hopeful person for others.... Hope, by definition, is undefeated. If you combine that with hard work and passion for community service, I’ll take those odds any day.” Amen to that.

Many thanks to Jonathan Webber and his colleagues for the work they do. Thanks to Dave Suhrweir for arranging these messages of hope every January. And thanks to the many people who worked behind the scenes to make Ministry of Reconciliation Sunday 2025 a success.

NOISY OFFERING SUNDAY

Bring your change this Sunday for our first Noisy Offering of 2025. The proceeds will go to the Southern Poverty Law Center. There are donation forms in the narthex if you want to give directly.



CAMPERS, ARISE!

By Mark Greeley, First Gentleman

It’s once again time for the St. Stephen Annual Camping Trip! We have six sites reserved at St. Joseph Peninsula State Park for the weekend of April 25-27. Some of these sites are for tents, some are for RVs, and some extend beyond the weekend if you’re interested in a longer stay.

Loose schedule: Arrive Friday night, beach/hike during the day Saturday, worship on Saturday night, pack up and head out Sunday. We have communal meals and plenty of experienced campers to help set up gear. It’s really a big family when we’re down there. And at all times there will be bacon. The sites are not all spoken for, so please get in touch with me (markhoffmangreeley@gmail.com) or Colin Hackley (colin@colinhackley.com) if you want to come.

YIPES. NO STRIPES.



Church Council member Rob Schiffer had to cancel last Saturday's workday for painting parking-lot stripes because temperatures were too low for the paint to stick. "Who'd have predicted that a few weeks ago?" he pondered. "We're looking at plans to reschedule, possibly for Feb. 22." Stay tuned.

MEANWHILE, INSIDE...

Saturday's outdoor painting might have been called off, but inside the fellowship hall two of our Church Council members were mighty busy. Sandy and Lawana Lamb-Daniels shampooed the carpet. Wow. Nicely done. Think of all the things that people do – when no one else is watching – to keep St. Stephen running smoothly. If you know any stories like that to share with the newsletter, please send them our way.



YOU'RE SO TALENTED

The annual St. Stephen Talent Show is coming up March 2. So there's slightly more than five weeks for you to keep burnishing those talents you want to display onstage. Pastor Tom will act as master of ceremonies this year. He's hoping for an enthusiastic audience (no problem there), and the entertainment world is hoping for a nifty mix of veteran and newly discovered talents. If you're chatting after the liturgy and have talent-related questions, ask show-biz veteran Rita Ford. Oh, one more thing: On March 2, between the end of the liturgy and the start of the show, there'll be a light lunch in the fellowship hall. "Mediterranean food from a local rabbi's ministry business," Pastor says.



EXCERPTS FROM PASTOR TOM'S SERMON

The Gospel writers define Jesus in unique ways:

- In Matthew, Jesus is a great teacher of righteousness, sort of like Moses.
- In Mark, Jesus is a cosmic battler for good and against evil. He exorcised demons, and it was evil that nailed him to the cross and good that raised him from the dead, turning him loose in the world.
- John's Gospel tells us that Jesus came to reveal God. "Only Jesus has seen God, and when we see Jesus we see the Almighty."
- Luke, the Gospel we read today, best summarizes Jesus as a prophet, but not the kind that has a crystal ball or one who predicts the future with cards. Not the prophet who shouts "The end is near!" But the prophet who comes speaking God's truth.

It's interesting, I think, the ways we see Jesus from different angles. How does He save? How does He heal? How does He come back to life and send forth the Spirit? What does Jesus look like?

We work to answer these questions, but Jesus (in the variety of ways we picture Him) is really most concerned with what's going on in here (pointing to the heart) and about what comes out here (pointing to the mouth) and about what we do with these (pointing to hands and feet). In essence, what do WE look like? So ... how would you describe yourself?

BEFORE YOU GO...

- We'll be sending the second order for T-shirts and sweatshirts in February. If anyone would like to get in on that order, it's \$22 for T-shirts and \$35 for sweatshirts. Please send an email to Lori or Pastor Tom with your details.
- If you have an anniversary, birthday, special memory or special St. Stephen person or program you'd like to honor, celebrate by sponsoring the altar flowers for our service. Sign up on the flower chart, out by the nametags, or ask Lori to sign you up. Include the \$40 with your regular offering. And then take the flowers home!
- The 2024 giving statements are available in the narthex.



UPCOMING BIRTHDAYS



Graham Hackley - 01/30
Warren Schave - 01/31
Jayden Schiffer - 01/31
Joey Bonfanti - 02/02
Gabbi Oates - 02/02
Barb ODonnell - 02/05
Chris Reece - 02/15
Patrick Kennell - 02/18
Lisa Medley - 02/25
Jackie Mustian - 02/25
Judi Duffy - 02/27
Rob Schiffer - 02/28

COMING UP

Today:

Noon - Al-Anon meets in fellowship hall (FH)
7 p.m. - AA meets in FH

This Friday:

9:30 a.m. - TOPS meets in FH

This Saturday:

10 a.m. - Sew for Hope meets in FH
6 p.m. - Cassandra reservation of FH

This Sunday:

9 a.m. - Book study
9:30 a.m. - Choir practice
10 a.m. - Worship, Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
11:30 a.m. - Congregational meeting
4 p.m. - Congolese Christian worship in FH



Monday, January 27:

5 p.m. - TIMA meets in FH
7 p.m. - TIMA meets in FH

Tuesday, January 28:

5 p.m. - NA meets in FH

Wednesday, January 29:

5 p.m. - TIMA meets in FH
7 p.m. - Choir practice



If you have news or photos to share,
please send them to Lori at
sslc@ststephenlutherantally.com.

Don't forget our Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/ststephentallahassee>.

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The Rev. Tom Holdcraft, Pastor