



ST. STEPHEN THIS WEEK

St. Stephen Lutheran Church Newsletter

ASHES

By Pastor Tom

Feb. 18 is Ash Wednesday, a day that reminds us that we are finite but belong to Christ. This day sets the tone for all of Lent as we are led to Holy Week and then the Easter Celebration. How will you pray, fast and give away gifts to those poor around you? I can find no other way to answer this significant question without first asking God to “Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me.”



How beautiful it is that by pressing a cross on our foreheads, we come to let go of the things that hinder us from love and service. I will be available for prayer and the imposition of ashes next Wednesday from noon to 1 p.m. in the St. Stephen parking lot. The Ash Wednesday evening service is at 6 p.m. with Holy Communion.

STILL KEEPING AN EYE ON ICE

By Sylvia Smith

St. Stephen sent a contingency to the steps of the Old Capitol last Sunday to participate in the weekly vigil and to join Pastor Tom and other faith leaders in prayer. A focus was food insecurity among folks most vulnerable to ICE and afraid to leave their homes, the conditions of detention, and the courage God gives us to step out in the faith that justice and humanity will prevail. God’s people are working hard to protect people. We heard stories of food delivery and protests in our Capitol. And together, we sang.



Regarding detention conditions and due process, last week our government won a case after making a horrific novel legal argument that the government can indefinitely detain people without bond in ICE facilities. This could impact millions of non-citizens who have been in the U.S. for

generations; who have never committed a crime; and who pose neither a risk of flight nor any threat to public safety. This ruling will be appealed, and we can follow the case here: <https://www.stevevladeck.com/p/208-the-fifth-circuit-jumps-the-immigration>. As this author explains, “it is not a crime to be undocumented. Although federal law does criminalize unlawful entry by a non-citizen, it does not criminalize unlawful presence. And, for a host of reasons, there are a large number of non-citizens who entered the country legally, but who lack permanent immigration status (two common examples are individuals who overstayed their visas, or who had a form of temporary protected status that subsequently expired or was rescinded).”

Our government has plans to dramatically expand detention facilities, where

there are no doctors and where death rates are increasing. We can read more in the Feb. 7 issue of “Letters from an American,” at

<https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/february-7-2026>

These prayer vigils are a wonderful community response to the temptation to despair over these issues. See you there soon!

Pictured at the Old Capitol, from left: Kirsten Ebbesen, Olivia James, Pastor Tom, Rev. Gerrard Lindsey (AME Church) and Sylvia Smith.

A CALL TO PROTECT HIV CARE

News of this event sponsored by the AIDS Healthcare Foundation also comes to us from Sylvia, who (by the way) is COO of Big Bend Cares and Care Point Health and Wellness Center.

At 10:30 a.m. on Ash Wednesday, faith leaders, people living with HIV, doctors and community advocates will gather at the Capitol to demand that Florida protect life-saving HIV care. Florida’s Department of Health has proposed slashing AIDS Drug Assistance Program eligibility from 400% to 130% of the Federal Poverty Level and eliminating insurance premium assistance — putting more than 16,000 Floridians at risk of losing treatment. On the same day a court hearing challenges the legality of these cuts, we will stand together in faith and in action. Ash Wednesday is a day of reflection and repentance. At the Capitol, it will be a day of moral clarity. HIV treatment saves lives. Viral suppression prevents transmission. Public health is not optional. We call on Florida’s elected leaders to choose care over cuts. Join us for:

- Interfaith prayer and reflection.
- Patient testimonies.
- Statements from medical and public health leaders



APRIL IS THE FULLEST MONTH

As Pastor Tom pointed out Sunday, April will be jam-packed with special events. So I’m getting out my old-school calendar and pencil, and you might want to do the same in your fancy 21st-century way.



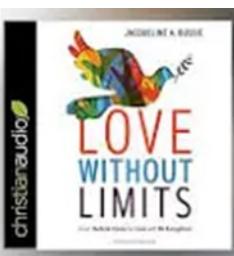
First there’s Holy Week, culminating in Easter Sunday, which is April 5.

Then there’s our spiritual retreat on Saturday, April 11. The next day, April 12, the retreat’s keynote speaker, Jacqueline Bussie, will be our guest preacher during the liturgy.

And the following weekend, April 17-19 (or selected portions of any of those days, as you wish), is the annual St. Stephen camping trip. Whew. (In May, we can relax.) Stay tuned for further details.

SPEAKING OF THE SPIRITUAL RETREAT...

St. Stephen has had a history of retreats – intimate gatherings designed to be times of spiritual renewal and connection for our congregation. Our upcoming retreat has a high-profile keynote speaker, but otherwise its object is the same as always. So registration currently is limited to our church family.



One more thing: If you want to buy Jacqueline Bussie’s book “Love Without Limits: Jesus’ Radical Vision for Love with No Exceptions,” you may search on Amazon.com or Thrift Books.com, or check at a local bookstore. (Hint: Search the whole title, because there are other books named “Love Without Limits.”) The author has agreed to have a book signing on both the afternoon of the retreat and the next day, after worship.

WELCOME, JACOB

Maybe you haven't had a chance yet to meet Jacob Nallapu, part of the group of people who joined St. Stephen last month. Here's a bit of information about him.



Until he moved to Tallahassee last fall, Jacob had lived his entire life in Michigan and Wisconsin. Now he works for the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, in the IT department.

He may be new to Florida, but not to Lutheranism. He says he was born, baptized and raised in the Lutheran church. So once he got here, he began searching for a church home. "I looked online and came to visit St. Stephen and Grace Lutheran churches," he said. "I fell in love the moment I entered the church." What caught his attention most of all? "The preaching of

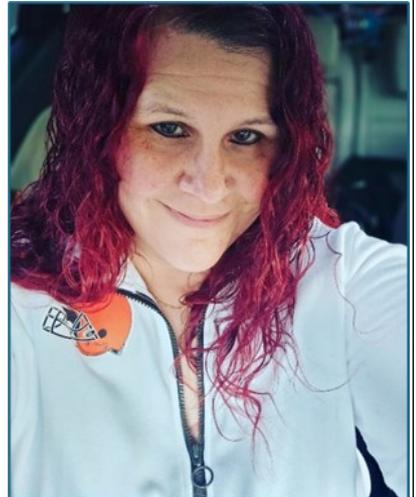
Pastor Tom; the architectural and interior design of the church; and the friendliness and warm welcome of the ushers and other members of the church."

Among Jacob's other interests are photography, movies, playing drums, sightseeing, cooking and grilling. Here's one other tidbit: "I am definitely a fun person to hang out with." Good to know! Good to have you with us, Jacob.

AND WELCOME, JENNIFER

Standing alongside Jacob when new members were welcomed last month was Jennifer Slusarz. She's a forensic and correctional psychologist who moved to Tallahassee last year, from Chattahoochee. Back in 2007, she moved to Florida from northern Illinois. Here in Tallahassee she enjoys fishing, traveling, reading, banking and watching Cleveland and THE Ohio State Buckeyes sports. ("I went to Cleveland State University – they didn't have a football team, so OSU was a great substitute.")

Like several of us at St. Stephen, Jennifer was raised Catholic. "I went to Catholic school from K-8," she said. "As I grew older, and members of my family came into their full personhood as members of the LGBTQ+ community, I could no longer support an organization that did not embrace God's love for all his children. For the past 20 years, I attended services at different churches sporadically, but I never felt at peace until coming to St. Stephen."



When she came to town, "I was looking for a welcoming, accepting congregation, and I knew I wanted to visit Reconciling in Christ Lutheran congregations, so St. Stephen was first on the list. From the moment I stepped into the church, I felt welcomed. I am so happy I found such a warm, compassionate church home! Thank you for creating such a wonderful, accepting environment filled with God's grace and love."

Check the church directory for Jennifer's or Jacob's contact information. Don't have the directory? Rita, our office manager, can fix you up.

'THE LIGHTS WILL TURN ON': EXCERPT FROM PASTOR TOM'S SERMON

When we think of the "Light of the world," we quickly think of Jesus. But Jesus tells the people, "*You are the Light of the World; you are the city on a hill.*" You can almost feel them scratching their heads, asking, "Who, me?" "Yes, you," Jesus replied.

In closing, I would like to share with you a section of Isaiah 58, but this time the translation is from The Message:

“What I am 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. Do this and the lights will turn on and your lives will turn around at once. Your righteousness will pave your way. The God of Glory will secure your passage. Then when you pray, God will answer. You will call out for help and [God] will say, “Here I am.””

BEFORE YOU GO...

- Please remember that you can look up past sermons or newsletters that you missed. Visit our website: <https://ststephenlutherantally.com/>.
- 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 name tags, or ask Rita to sign you up. Include the \$40 with your regular offering. And then take the flowers home!
- And here is the classic car of the week, the ultra-cute 1960 Nash Metropolitan.



SERVING THIS WEEK

Pastor Tom Holdcraft, Preaching and Presiding; **Kirsten Ebbesen**, Assisting Minister; **Rita Ford**, Cup Minister; **Chris/Graham Reece**, Lector; **Loraine Sundberg and Colin Hackley**, Tech Team; **Barbara Sullivan and Linda Eshleman**, Altar Guild; **Kirsten Ebbesen and Marilyn Larson**, Counters; **Susan Hehn**, Cantor; **Bob Eshleman and Patrick Kennell**, Ushers; **Denise Bookwalter**, Announcements

UPCOMING BIRTHDAYS

- Chris Reece - 2/15
- Patrick Kennell - 2/18
- Margarete Deckert - 2/19
- Jackie Mustian - 2/25
- Lisa Medley - 2/25
- Judi Duffy - 2/27
- Rob Schiffer - 2/28
- Jan Harrison - 3/2
- Jim Christianson - 3/3
- Robin Oliveri - 3/5
- Sylvia Smith - 3/6



COMING UP

Today:

10:00 a.m. - Bible study

Noon - Al-Anon meets in Pastor Emory Hingst Memorial Fellowship Hall, aka Hingst Hall (HH)

7 p.m. - AA meets in HH

This Friday:

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

This Sunday:

9 a.m. - Bible study

9:30 a.m. - Choir

10 a.m. - Worship: Transfiguration of Our Lord Sunday

Monday, February 16:

5:00 p.m. - TIMA meets in HH

Tuesday, February 17:

5:00 p.m. - NA meets in HH

Wednesday, February 18:

Noon - 1p.m. Ashes in parking lot

5:45 p.m. - Choir rehearsal

6:00 p.m. - Ash Wednesday Service

7:00 p.m. - Choir rehearsal

Thursday, February 19:

10:00 a.m. - Bible study



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

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

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, ELCA