



ST. STEPHEN THIS WEEK

St. Stephen Lutheran Church Newsletter



Nearly all of this newsletter was written before the previously unthinkable events of Wednesday afternoon, when followers of the outgoing president followed his instructions to storm the U.S. Capitol. We pray for our nation. These candles, shown in a video capture from the Christmas Eve service, flickered but never lost their flame. May they represent our resolve as we work together to reunite our country.

A BLESSED SERVICE ON CHRISTMAS EVE

During a year turned upside-down by a pandemic and politics run amok, a year of scary headlines and money woes, we at St. Stephen had a special blessing: a pastor, a music director, musicians, videographers and other faithful servants who never let us down. Each Sunday morning, our liturgy was there for us. For that hour, Pastor Tom and the worship team reminded us that God was still with us. They filled us with hope to withstand the week to come, and the week after that, and the week after that.



No, we couldn't see Pastor Tom's smile behind that mask. We couldn't see Katharine behind the keyboard, always just beyond the camera's reach. We caught only rare glimpses of the handful of onsite worshipers. Nevertheless, we were worshipping together. From our homes, sometimes in our jammies, maybe with pets in our lap, we prayed together, sang

together and even communed together.

The Christmas Eve liturgy capped off the year perfectly: Katharine's extended prelude, Pastor Tom's moving sermon (see excerpt below), Isabel and Wesley's duet, even the traditional lighting of candles and the singing of "Silent Night." In some ways it was better than our usual Christmas celebration – because it was captured on video, so even those of us who missed it on Dec. 24 could participate days later.


Thank God, again and again, for Pastor Tom Holdcraft, Katharine Gossman, Karl Barton, Isabel Barton, Paul van der Mark, Jonas Holdcraft, Tom Buchanan, worship coordinator Beth Alexander, the mighty Altar Guild and everyone else

who breathed new life into our liturgies this past year.

Thanks, too, to the people who donated those beautiful poinsettias, along with the architects of that magnificent poinsettia Christmas tree. Want to adopt one of those poinsettias? By Saturday they'll be out of the sanctuary. Beth says she'll set them aside in a designated area. Circle the parking lot and look for a cluster of red plants pleading, "Take me home!"



UPDATES FROM PASTOR TOM

- **Reminder:** This Sunday we'll have our third congregational information meeting to discuss the sanctuary repair and renovation project. Please connect to the Zoom link at 11:30 a.m. (Lori will send out the link Friday) or get in touch with me to reserve a space in person at the church.
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- The Building Design Team is formed and at work preparing for this Sunday's Zoom meeting. Denise Bookwalter has been elected team leader. The other members are Mark Bertolami, Margaret Bowers, David Butler, Bryon Ehlmann, Mark Greeley, Ann Hingst and Jim Sampson. Please join me in appreciation for their care and stewardship in serving St. Stephen in this way!
 - In humble celebration, we begin 2021 with an estimate-of-giving total that exceeds last year's estimate by more than \$26,000! That includes 15 individuals or families who increased their pledge from 2020 – as well as 13 who didn't pledge at all last year. On behalf of the Church Council, thank you for keeping your financial stewardship to St. Stephen a priority.
 - I'm also excited to update you on funds received and pledges made for the sanctuary repair and renovation project. As of Wednesday, St. Stephen already had in hand \$51,378 dedicated to the project – plus pledges of more than \$68,622 committed toward the project and other renovations! We give thanks for every gift and pledge, no matter the size. The Council, Building Design Team and I are inspired for the work ahead because of your generosity, St. Stephen .
 - Lori, Katharine, Karl, Isabel and I would like to extend our deep appreciation and thanks for your generous Christmas bonuses. Your expression of love was realized. We look forward to 2021 and give thanks for the purpose God gives us in worship and congregational life and health.

TWO MORE NOTES ABOUT THOSE GIFTS...

From Katharine: "Thank you for your most kind and generous Christmas gift. I hope everyone is well and that your 2021 is much improved over last year! Peace." From Lori: "I am so amazed at your generous heart and thank you so much for the Christmas gift. It really does help during these trying times. Here's to a better 2021!"

THE ADVENTURES OF URSULA

St. Stephen lost its most lovable extrovert two years ago when Ursula Morgan moved to Virginia to be closer to her family. Over the holidays, Ursula sent this update to her “dear St. Stephen family.”

This pandemic has taught me that what really matters in life is not toilet paper; it’s our interdependence with each other. Leaving Tallahassee, which had been my home since 1963, was one of the hardest decisions I ever made, but here I am two years later, 70 years young, starting all over again.

As many of you know, my daughter Jennifer is now a 17-year brain cancer survivor (praise God, from whom all blessings flow), but she still struggles with fatigue and other issues. She and Winston are grateful that we moved to Reston to help take care of their lively little girl, Lorelei, and her little brother, Callen. Years ago, Jennifer joined Christ the Servant Lutheran Church, and I joined when we moved here. She sings in the small choir, being the only alto. I often imagine you all singing the same hymns and following the same liturgy.

Our little church is very progressive; last fall, the pastor asked me to lead adult education discussions focusing on social justice, reading books by Christian writers like Marcus Borg and Jim Wallis, among others. This past spring, we voted to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation.



For all of us, this past year has been very tough. However, two wonderful things happened to my family: the birth of Lori’s brother, Cal, on New Year’s Day, and the birth of Benji and Penny’s brother, Sebastian (Baz), in June. I wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a healthy, happy New Year. Peace be with you.

MEETING THE SAINT WHOSE NAME WE BEAR



Who better to have hanging on our wall than the martyred saint named Stephen? And who better to paint that picture than Robin Whitley, one of our truly unforgettable vicars? Robin, a writer, artist, musician and kind soul, has carved out a lovely life in North Carolina – yet still finds time to maintain a relationship with this congregation, where she interned in 1992-1993. She has told us repeatedly that that was one of the best years of her life. Thus, the gift of this painting.



“The entire process has been deeply moving to pray for you all and to learn more about Stephen and his importance to Christianity,” she wrote in a recent email. Like many an artist, she’s not 100-percent pleased with her creation.

“I worry that it’s not perfect, but it is full of heart, and painting it has been a tremendous blessing to me,” she wrote. “Not only has it held you all close to my heart (thinking how you would look upon it), but I have a new fascination with learning more about the saint himself.”

Actually, this painting is part of a pair. Robin will be sending us a companion piece depicting Jerusalem. To see more of Robin’s multiple creative pursuits, visit www.jrobinwhitley.net. There, she greets visitors with this message: “Life is art. Live beautifully!”

Thank you for this gift from your heart, Robin.

ST. STEPHEN’S YOUNG ACTORS



Over the holidays, at least three of St. Stephen’s youngest members lent their talents to Young Actors Theatre stage presentations.

Blake Simmons appeared as Aaron Burr from “Hamilton” in “It’s Only Intermission!” You’ll see Blake introduce herself at the 1:43 mark in the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQqHO8xZpvc&feature=youtu.be>. Her proud grandmother, Sharon, offers this guidance: “After opening credits, scroll through to 23 min. And that starts ‘Hamilton.’ After it’s over, scroll to 45 minutes, and it’s the grand finale. Blake is in back right.”

Elliot Reece appeared in “Olaf’s Frozen Adventure” (presented by Performers Unlimited Prep). Catch his introduction at 0:58 in the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEI25vsG-Xk&feature=youtu.be>. And Julia Bonfanti appeared in “Happily Ever After” (presented by Kids Company and Young Performers 3). Catch her introduction at 1:15: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW2j_uqLct0&feature=youtu.be.



WE CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW

Many of us haven’t visited the grounds of St. Stephen since March. But while we’ve been away, the weeds and vines have been at play. In fact, they had pretty much taken over this fence around the playground. Then, last month, they met their match in David Butler. Thank you, sir! And thank you, Beth, for the photographic evidence.

EXCERPT FROM PASTOR TOM'S CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON

“... The truth is, sometimes we get so wrapped up in having to believe that ‘believe’ can almost become a command or an order. ‘Believe’ is like the Christmas buzzword. And sometimes we are called on to believe. But, tonight, we choose to hope. Hope does not require certainty or intellectual understanding. Hope propels us forward to recognize God at work.... We may be able to make sense of it later in our lives, but for now, we rest and rely on hope from, of all things, a baby....”

BIBLE STUDY DOESN'T FIT YOUR SCHEDULE?

For those who'd like to take part in the weekly Bible study but have a schedule conflict, here's a link to the recorded meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/4EnMlrv9gLarsONgrwLUquTV5KuDfl9XzHby17vX0T6WwtDI00Yr2uoWel4N8D9W.cNI9EBSbevQXcuUS>

The access code is **E8Y5^?*V**

MISC.

- Someone kindly sent a check to St. Stephen ... but we don't know who! The check, dated Dec. 28, was drawn on a Payveris account, but there's no name or account number. If this sounds familiar, please get in touch with Lori Zengel in the church office so we can give you credit.
- Lori reminds us that, even though we're worshipping virtually, we're still using altar flowers – which we can see on our computer screens. If you pay \$35 for that Sunday's flowers, you'll get an invitation to be among the 15 or fewer people who get to worship in person with Pastor Tom and Co. in the sanctuary. If you attend, you can take the flowers home with you. If you choose not to attend, you can pick up the flowers from the fellowship hall – or make other arrangements with Lori.
- Have anything to add to a future newsletter? Email Lori at sslc@ststephenlutherantally.com or call 850-385-2728.



UPCOMING BIRTHDAYS

Vince Muchuruza - 01/10
Marsy Miller - 01/10
Mary Andersen - 01/11
Mason Bonfanti - 01/11
Sharon Gordon-Girvin - 01/11
Erin Kenney - 01/11
Mark Canning - 01/13
Natalie Schiffer - 01/15
Nathan Basford - 01/19
Myrna Dowdell - 01/21
Stephen Barton - 01/22
Denise Bookwalter - 01/22
Ann Hingst - 01/22
Sandy Ness - 01/24
Gladys Kane - 01/28
Jennifer Buchanan - 01/29
Graham Hackley - 01/30
Colin Schiffer - 01/30
Warren Schave - 01/31
Jayden Schiffer - 01/31



UPCOMING DATES

This Sunday:

10 a.m. - Worship, Baptism of Our Lord Sunday

11:30 a.m. - Congregational meeting via Zoom

Wednesday, Jan. 13:

Noon - Bible study



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

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

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The Rev. Tom Holdcraft, Pastor

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