

E-Portion for December

November 28, 2006

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Rector's Column

When you think of Advent, what words and images come to your mind? Two of the words that come to my mind are "preparing" and "waiting." At first these sound like contradictory messages but I want to suggest that they are really two sides to the same coin.

John the Baptist comes "preparing the way." We, too, are called to prepare the way. The problem is that much of what we think of as preparation, especially in December, can be pretty manic. We fight one another for limited parking places at the mall; we worry that if we don't get our shopping done Christmas won't come; our social calendars fill beyond full. In short, Advent preparation can become frenetic. So I invite you to a counter-cultural approach that I think is in fact at the heart of what Advent is about: preparing our hearts and minds and bodies for the one who is coming. Find time to do an adult study, or pray the daily office, or go for a long walk, or attend a mid-week service. Make time for your family to eat supper together—even if you have to say no to sixteen other things. Light those candles on an Advent wreath, one at a time. Put first things first: that is Advent preparation.

On the other end of the spectrum, we tend to think of waiting as a passive activity. Especially in families with very young children, parents actively "prepare" as children anxiously "wait." But Advent waiting is active. Advent waiting is about cultivating practices that open our eyes and our ears so that when the Christ breaks in, we have eyes that see and ears that hear. Passive waiting almost always leads to disappointment because we aren't engaged. We think God is going to do it all. But God waits with Zechariah and Elizabeth, and with Mary and Joseph. God needs their "yesses" to stir things up in Advent.

When a couple is waiting for the birth of a child, waiting and preparing come together. There are things the family needs to do to "get ready." But they are not in control. The process of waiting and watching a belly grow is active and energizing and even a little scary. The birth of a child is a great joy, but it comes also with holy fear. It comes as a great gift, but also with a great responsibility.

We wait and we prepare, as a parish, for the birth of a child: for the coming of Christ. We wait and prepare for God-with-us. May we use this time in ways that cultivate life for each of us, for those dear to us, and for this parish family.

Advent IV/Christmas Eve

The two central Christian feast days celebrate Christ's birth and re-birth: Christmas and Easter. As you all know, Easter is not tied to a fixed date: it is "always the Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox on March 21." (BCP 880) But Christmas is different. Christmas is on fixed date: December 25. That means that Christmas Eve can fall on any day of the week; and this year it calls on a Sunday.

What does that mean practically? It means that on December 24 we'll celebrate both the Fourth Sunday of Advent *and* Christmas Eve! It will be a full weekend!

The way that we'll do this is to offer a simpler liturgy, more in the Taize/contemplative style, on Saturday, December 23 at 5 p.m. and Sunday, December 24 at 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. In addition, these Eucharistic liturgies will offer an opportunity for laying on of hands and prayers for healing. Christmas is a joyous time but for many of us it is also a difficult time. Old wounds and losses and griefs are sometimes painfully re-opened. There is joy and wonder in the holy chaos of Christmas Eve but it also brings with it no small amount of anxiety and stress. So our hope is that rather than adding more chaos, the simplicity of our Advent IV worship will ground us in the healing and loving power of Christ.

It will be tempting for families to stay home on Sunday morning since the family will be back in church at 4:30 p.m. or 10:30 p.m. that same night. That is an understandable temptation. But you might reflect on how you can best worship

on Fourth Advent—even given the complexities of the calendar this year. For some that might mean coming on Saturday night. For others, perhaps with younger children, it might mean coming to church without the kids in the morning, so that you are fed and grounded and ready to face for the rest of the day. In any case while there is no church school on December 24, we will still gather as God’s people for worship on that day: at 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. to celebrate the Fourth Sunday of Advent and at 4:30 p.m., and 10:30 p.m. to celebrate Christmas Eve. (And then we’ll be back together at 10 a.m. on Christmas Day, as well!)

Advent Worship Schedule

Saturdays 5:00 p.m. Holy Eucharist
Sundays 8:00 a.m. Holy Eucharist
10:00 a.m. Holy Eucharist

On the weekend of Advent 4—December 23/24 services will include prayers for Healing.

Ecumenical Taize Worship at 7:00 p.m.

December 6 at Immanuel Lutheran
December 13 at St. Francis
December 20 at St. Mary’s

Note: The Ecumenical services replace our mid-week Eucharist services in December.
(There is no service on December 27th.)

Stewardship Update

The Stewardship Committee would like to thank everyone for the incredible response to this year’s pledge effort. As of the November 19th In-Gathering, the parish has pledged \$258,893! We are very thankful that the parish has responded so generously to allow St. Francis to do the work God has given us to do.

There are still outstanding pledges we hope to receive soon! If you have not yet pledged, please send in your pledge card this week or talk to Laura Caswell.

-- The Stewardship Committee

SURVEY SAYS.....

THIS MONTH: As you saw last month the Diocesan Survey Results are in. Below are more of your responses.
A CONGREGATIONAL PROFILE (continued)

1. 50% OF PARISHIONERS VALUE Holy Communion and the Sermon as the most important aspect of the Congregation. Youth ministry is 35%.
2. In terms of the music program, 67 % prefer traditional hymns and 39% contemporary hymns.
3. 60% of the Congregation is regularly involved in group activities such as Church School, Bible Study and fellowship. (The national average is only 46%)
4. 58% of individuals are involved in leadership roles. (National average 38%)
5. 58% of Parishioners take part in the community service, social justice or advocacy activities, some through the congregation and some on their own. (National average is only 18%)

Christian Formation Programs (please see the sign-up sheets in the narthex)

Outrageous Women in the Bible—Part 1 ~ An Exploration of Matthew 1

November 28th through December 19th on Tuesday evenings at St. Clare House. Please sign up in the narthex.

Advent Quiet Day

It is our custom at St. Francis to build in a half-day “spiritual retreat” in the midst of Advent and Lent. This year we’ll gather at St. Clare House on Saturday, December 9 for this time of quiet and nourishment. Meditations will be led by the rector, with times for a walk or silent meditation in between. The schedule will be as follows:

8:30 a.m. Gathering Time
8:45 a.m. Contemplative Morning Prayer
10:00 a.m. First Meditation, followed by a time for silent prayer and reflection
11:00 a.m. Second Meditation, followed by a time for silent prayer and reflection
12:00 p.m. Noonday Prayers and a simple lunch of soup, bread, and cheese

Please sign up on the sheet in the narthex.

Newcomer's Coffee

Sunday, December 10th at St. Clare House immediately following the 10:00 a.m. service

This casual, social event is a simple way to welcome new friends and neighbors to the St. Francis community. If you or someone you know would like an invitation to the event; please contact Andrea Deane 886-0178 or Bizymum@verizon.net.

Babysitting will be available in the nursery for children up to 10 years old.

Please include in your message; the number of children you think might need babysitting services during the event.

There is also a sign-up sheet in the narthex.

Advent Celebration

December 16/17 ~ The children will use the entire worship time for our Advent celebrations. Parents! If you're able to bring snack items for our parties, please sign up in the narthex. Cookies (homemade or store bought), brownies, "Munchkins," popcorn, juice. Thank you!

Please note: There will be no Church School on the weekends of December 23/24 and December 30/31.

Sign up has begun for this year's "Living Creche." This nativity pageant is a gift from the adults of our congregation to our children and is presented on Christmas Eve at the 4:30 p.m. service. Youth participation (Middle School, High School) is always welcome!

Preparation is minimal: scripts can be found with the sign up sheet, and we will have one rehearsal to "walk through" the script on the Sunday before Christmas (December 17th) right after the 10:00 a.m. service. On Christmas Eve, participants need to show up a little early to get into their costumes. Children love to see familiar people telling the Christmas story in this way. Please consider signing up!

Calling all Angels: The pageant includes a creative movement piece done by the angels. Students in Grades 5 and up are invited to join in here. A sign-up sheet will be posted in the narthex and a rehearsal time will be chosen based on availability of the "angels!"

An Advent Event for our Church Family Sunday, December 17th beginning at 4:30 p.m.

Join us for Food, Fun and Fellowship

Pizza, Subs, and Drinks ~ A Free Will offering will be taken to help subsidize costs.

Making "Chrismon" ornaments for the St. Francis family Christmas tree (bring your GOLD glitter, ribbon, etc. etc.)

Caroling at 6:00 p.m. followed by cocoa and cookies back at the church. Please bring a plate of cookies to share.

Come for all or drop in when you can! Sign up on the table in the narthex.

Mission Matters

Heifer Living Gift Market ~ December 3rd after the 10:00 a.m. service.

Join the tradition at St. Francis in changing the world 2 by 2. Help purchase an arkful of animals (\$5000.00). There will be live barnyard animals, displays, food and more. Give the life-changing gift of a Heifer International animal in honor of a loved one or friend. Giving a Heifer gift takes the stress out of shopping while putting the meaning back into giving. A VERY SPECIAL WAY TO SHOW YOU CARE!

Episcopal Relief and Development "Gifts for Life" ERD is the collective response of Episcopalians to help people in need in the United States and around the world. Rebuilding homes and providing shelter after a disaster is a vital part of any recovery program. Effective, rapid response can be the difference between life and death and is the foundation for ERD's long term recovery program. Programs are currently underway in Sri Lanka, Thailand, India and Indonesia.

Worcester Common Ground—Their goals are to build permanent affordable housing for the local community. They're an inner city, community based land trust whose aim is to improve neighborhoods and help residents in the area. Their commitment is to build or renovate homes and properties for families who earn below 50% of the median income. Two recent projects are:

- Eddies Super Plaza (300 Pleasant St) ~ 6 apartments above the store have been renovated and are in the process of being rented.
- Mason Street Townhouses (48 Mason St) ~ 21 townhouses are planned for the site of the old institutional linen plant and currently a huge dumping site. Initial construction will begin soon.

Thank you...thank you...and again thank you!

-for your support of the Veterans Day weekend "Drop in the Bucket". The collection went to the Montachusett Veterans Outreach Program to be to buy colorful prints to enhance their living area.

- for your Thanksgiving offering designated for Central Las Americas, Worcester, to help them provide food for the local Latino communities and others in need.
- for the annual food drive for Wachusett Food Pantry—collected by the children and coordinated by Susan Bastardo.

Submitted by Jeanne Schutte for the Mission Team.

Bunny Huddleston, Chairperson 508-886-4969 – darrellandbunny@msn.com

Christmas Eve/Day Schedule

Sunday, December 24th ~

4:30 p.m. Pageant with Eucharist

10:30 p.m. Festival Eucharist

Monday, December 25th ~

10:00 a.m. Holy Eucharist

Adult Confirmation/(New Member Class)

Anyone who is interested in learning more about The Episcopal Church and becoming a member of St. Francis Church, please mark your calendars with two important dates.

Sunday, January 7th at 11:00 a.m. in the Library

Sunday, May 6 at 10:00 a.m. Bishop's visit—when adults and young people are confirmed or received.

In between, depending upon the make-up of the class and the questions raised on 1/7, we'll build an agenda for 4-6 group meetings that will provide preparation for the Bishop's visit.

Bement/Waterfield Educational Grants

High School Seniors and College students are encouraged to apply for the Bement/Waterfield Grant.

Applicants should request forms by writing to the Bement/Waterfield Educational Grants Committee, Diocese of Western Massachusetts, 37 Chestnut Street, Springfield, MA 01103. They must also send FAFSA forms issued at the College Scholarship Service, Princeton, NJ 08540 for each year in which they apply for assistance.

The deadline for applications and supporting documents is no later than February 15, 2007.

Information is on the bulletin board in the narthex hallway.

The next Little Portion deadline is Thursday, January 18th.