



Hope Peace Joy Love Christ

Newsletter December 2014

What is God Growing?

My friend Liz Green, who worships at Christ Church Hamilton and serves on the ECCO Board, is a farmer. December is down time for her. There is nothing to plant, nurture, or harvest. Finally, after a busy growing season, she can rest. It's Sabbath time.

Yet, despite the deep darkness and cold of the season, all of our images and stories during Advent focus on the coming... the growing of light and life. In our Advent 3 reading from Isaiah 61, the prophet announces, "For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." The people of Israel understood oppression and hopelessness; our Advent readings promise comfort and renewed life.

As our Gospels focus on John the Baptist, we are called to prepare for the coming of the Christ light. Further, our Gospel stories tell of miraculous annunciations by angels and unlikely babies growing in the wombs of Mary and her cousin Elizabeth.

On Christmas Eve, we will hear, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined." (*Isaiah 9.2*) And on Christmas morning, the opening verses of John's Gospel remind us, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

The secular world pierces the darkness with bright lights, lavish parties, and piles of presents. Yet, momentary highs and material goods won't provide lasting light and life. In fact, their momentary magic tends to lead to next day hangovers and regrets, and unpayable January bills.

Our faith, on the other hand, promises new life and bright light shining in the darkness. While we can't drive away the cold and darkness of the climate or of our lives, we can let God nurture healing and wholeness in us. We can open ourselves to life growing in us. We can give ourselves over to "tidings of great joy."

On December 13 from 9:00am until 1:00pm, the North Shore Mission Hub and Diocesan Leadership Development Initiative are offering an Advent Listening Retreat—"What is God Growing in Your Congregation?" This retreat will offer us time and space as individuals and as members of St. Stephen's to consider thoughtfully and prayerfully how God is calling us. It will invite reflection on what God wants and needs to grow in us as individuals and as a congregation. Take a little Sabbath time this Advent to listen to God.

A virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

MATTHEW 1:23

Rev. Sarah Speaks

Dear Friends,

On Christmas Eve the St. Stephen's children and teens will provide a beautiful re-telling of how Jesus came into the world. The Christmas Pageant, based on the Gospel stories, will open with the angel Gabriel sharing with Mary the news that she will soon give birth to the Son of God. We'll then hear how a pregnant Mary, along with Joseph, were required to travel to Bethlehem only to discover that a stable would have to serve as a birthing room.

But wait! What about the four weeks leading up to Christmas also known as the season of Advent? I've always thought of Advent as the unnoticed, shy older sibling of Christmas. It's reliable, coming around every year. Yet it's not flashy or exciting. We notice when the altar cloths are changed to purple and when we light the candles on the Advent wreath, but we're all focused on getting to Christmas (often even before Halloween). After all we count down the days until Christmas, we don't count down the days until Advent.

Part of the problem is that Advent is all about *waiting*, which is a skill we all need to work on. Honestly, most of us don't like to wait—for the bus, for a phone call, for a friend to arrive etc... What makes it so hard is that we it makes us realize what little control we have over our lives. The bus will get here when it's ready, not when we're ready. No matter how long we stare at the phone we can't make it ring or buzz or chime. Our friend can promise to arrive by a certain time, but it's likely something or someone will make him/her break that promise.

So how do we wait during Advent? How do we be present without wishing for Christmas? We wait by active preparation! We don't sit idly by counting the days and minutes. In preparing our churches, our homes and ourselves we can be ready on December 25 to welcome Jesus into these places. Without this preparation there is no room for Jesus, not only at the inns of Bethlehem, but also in our lives.

As we *wait* and *prepare* there will be easy times and really hard times. In those really hard times I invite you to take, read and inwardly digest the **Advent Resource Packet** found in the Galahad Area. It is a brief offering of prayers, reflections and other resources to help you and your family and friends (of all ages) avoid the annual stampede toward Christmas. Feel to enjoy what is useful and take out what isn't so useful.

Jesus is coming! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Blessings
Sarah

GRACE NOTES:

Our new Bishop Alan Gates told us that on a recent day near Halloween, when he was robed, a child asked him, "Is that a costume or is it real?"

As our laughter ended, he said, "That's the question we must all answer: is it a costume or is it real?"

The crowd of responsive people gathered at St. Stephen's in Convention appeared to think the bishop's costume was very real indeed.

But perhaps the group of St. Stephen's volunteers was asking a different question, as we worked to make people feel welcome in the friendly halls of St. Stephen's. *Is the bishop's cloak big enough, warm enough, loving enough, to cover us all?*

That's what I was thinking, anyway, standing at the main doors and said "Welcome to St. Stephen's to an ever-growing river of smiling people. (Who made it easy to smile back.)"

As you look at these photos of the Convention, you may feel the answer is YES.

--Con Squires



THANK YOU ST. STEPHEN'S!

On November 8, St. Stephen's hosted Diocesan Convention and the 750 people who attended can't stop talking about our awesome hospitality. Many thanks to all of the St. Stephen's volunteers and staff who opened our doors and our hearts, fed those who were hungry, gave drink to those who were thirsty, and guided the lost. Somehow it sounds a little like Jesus-work (*Matthew 25*). In the meantime, the words of gratitude keep coming from everyone from Bishop Alan Gates to lay delegates from around the Diocese. While some in the Diocese would like to return to Lynn next year, we think we might want to wait a few years. But it really is good to show others and remind ourselves what a truly welcoming community we are.

With gratitude, Chris Trahan and Ginny Fuller



STEWARDS OF RESOURCES

VESTRY SUMMARY: NOVEMBER 16. The Vestry reviewed financials, discussed Pledge Pay Up Sunday, expressed hopes for the expense side of the 2015 budget, received a report from the Stewardship Ministry Team, and debriefed Diocesan Convention.

STEWARDSHIP MINISTRY TEAM PLANS PLEDGE FOLLOW UP. As we reach toward our pledge goal of \$125,000, the Stewardship Ministry Team and Vestry will make pledge follow up phone calls in December to encourage previous pledgers to return their 2015 pledge commitment cards and to inspire new people to join the ranks of pledging members. Already 59 households have pledged \$89,986.81, which means we are almost two-thirds of the way to our goal. But, we actually need to surpass our goal if we hope to fund the ministry envisioned by the Vestry when it discussed the expense side of the 2015 budget. Please say, "Here I am, Lord!" as we support the people of St. Stephen's doing God's work in the world.

PLEDGE PAY UP SUNDAY IS DECEMBER 7. As the Vestry reviewed financials, we discovered that pledge payments are lagging at 87.5%. Our budget assumes 100% pledge payment and we depend on all of you making that happen. Pledge statements will be mailed soon. In addition, on December 7, the Treasurer will post in the Galahad Area and on the Office Door a list with Pledge Envelope Numbers (not names) and pledge amounts remaining to be paid. For those who do not have envelopes, please stop by the Treasurer's Office to receive your update. An end-of-year positive financial position depends on all of us paying our pledges.

HARVEST FAIR CLOSES STRONG WITH MINI-FAIR. Multi-generational Minute-to-Win-It team games, Same Day Raffles, and Bargain Buys made for a fabulous close to the 2014 Fair. While accounting is not yet complete, it looks like the Fair will come close to raising \$15,000. Many thanks to the Fair Leadership Team of Irene Axelrod, Marilyn Cloran, Sally Gosselin, Carolyn Hoy, Lucinda McClain, Neil O'Donnell, and Josephine Russo who guided us through Fair season as well as everyone who contributed by buying, selling, baking, and volunteering. Winners of the Super Sports Raffles: Patriots tickets-- E. Cronin; Bruins tickets-- Alville Collymore. Winners of the Multi-Prize Raffles: 2 nights Trapp Family Lodge Guesthouse-- Adelaide Dos Santos; GPS-- Matt Vocino; Keurig Coffee Maker-- Stacey Minchello; \$50 Panera Gift Card-- Joyce Wallace; \$50 Marshall's Gift Card-- Ana Rita; VISA Gift Card-- Sid Marange.

ST. STEPHEN'S TIFFANY WINDOW NOTECARDS FOR SALE. We have once again made note cards with 5 designs from our Tiffany windows. Packages of 10 cards cost \$10. The assorted pack includes 2 each of 5 designs. We also have single card packs, which offer ten cards of Mary from the Annunciation window that is suitable for a Christmas card or a picture of lilies in pastel pink, blue and green from a small window below the Annunciation window. These two designs are included in the assorted pack along with a window behind the altar, the bright green window in the ambulatory often called the "ladybug" window, and another window with circles in pinks and mauve with an arc above them. The cards lend themselves nicely to different occasions when you wish to write a personal note rather than purchase a standard card. Packages can be purchased in the office or from Marilyn Cloran at church; they can be mailed for an additional \$3. Marilyn and Rick Cloran took the photos.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE IS LOOKING FOR LEADERS. Our Parish, Deanery, and Diocese need leaders and the good news is that the leaders we need are sitting in our pews. Please think, pray, and talk to Nominating Committee members Irene Axelrod, Joanne Droppers, Jeffrey McAvoy, and Chris Trahan, as you reflect on whether God might be calling you to serve.

NURTURING THE CONGREGATION

TAKE A CALENDAR; COUNT THE DAYS. As we prepare for the coming of Christ, Christian tradition encourages us to count the days until Christmas with a focused, practice of prayer. A variety of Advent calendars, activity sheets, and booklets of readings are available in the Galahad Area. Join the Advent Conspiracy and put preparing for Jesus at the center of your December.

ADVENT STUDY AND REFLECTION OPPORTUNITIES. Wednesday evening Bible Study will take a break from Paul and dive into our Advent readings. Join us any Wednesday at 6:30pm. On Thursdays at 1:00, following our noon worship with healing prayers, Tea and Talk about Faith will read and discuss a series of Advent reflections by spiritual writers across the centuries. Take time in the midst of the busy-ness to prepare for Jesus being born in you.

TUESDAY DECEMBER 2 AT THE MONASTERY. On Tuesday, December 2, we will join the SSJE Brothers for worship and supper at the Monastery. The Monastery Chapel is a place of quiet beauty, which lends itself to Advent's encouragement of letting something sacred grow within us. Sign up is required but please join us on Tuesday December 2. Cars leave St. Stephen's at 4:15 and return about 8:00.

WHAT IS GOD GROWING IN YOU? A LISTENING RETREAT. On Saturday, December 13 from 9:00 to 1:00 the North Shore Mission Hub and Diocesan Leadership Development Initiative invite you to an Advent Listening Retreat. Duncan Hilton and Isaac Martinez will guide us through periods of prayer, reflection, and conversation as we discern individually and as members of St. Stephen's what God might want and need to grow in us. The central image of Advent is Mary saying YES to God. Please devote one Saturday morning to discerning how and where God might be calling you and us. Lunch will be provided.

HEALING PRAYER AND PASTORAL CARE TEAM MEET DECEMBER 4. The Healing Prayer and Pastoral Care Teams will meet at 10:30 on Thursday, December 4th. Our discussion will focus on chapters 1-6 of The Shack.

BLUE CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION ON DECEMBER 22 AT 6:30. We all know that the holidays can be difficult when pain and loss make life hard. In our Blue Christmas service, we offer a chance to offer to God the pain, disappointment and loss of our lives as we recognize the reality that "the light came into the world and the darkness did not overcome it." We light candles in the darkness; we hear words of comfort and strength; we offer prayers for healing and wholeness; and we gather at God's table to be fed. As Christians, we believe that nothing can overcome the light of Christ in our lives and in the world but this does not mean that we must pretend that our lives are all that God and we would want them to be. Join us for Blue Christmas and bring with you those for whom you suspect this holiday season may be hard.

DECK THE HALLS ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21 AT NOON. The timing of Christmas is perfect this year for a community church decorating party; help us Deck the Halls after church on December 21. While young people practice for the Pageant, adults will eat. And then we will transform the church from Advent to Christmas. We will clean, hang, arrange and polish. The more people who lend a hand, the more we can do to beautify our church for Christmas.

JESUS IS THE REASON FOR THE SEASON

JOIN US AS WE CELEBRATE THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

MONDAY, DECEMBER 22

6:30PM BLUE CHRISTMAS

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 24—CHRISTMAS EVE

5:30PM CHRISTMAS PAGEANT WITH CAROLS & COMMUNION

10:00PM CHRISTMAS CAROL SING

10:30 CHRISTMAS CANDLELIGHT COMMUNION

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25—CHRISTMAS

10:00AM CHRISTMAS COMMUNION WITH CAROLS

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 28

8:00AM HOLY COMMUNION WITH SERMON

10:00AM CHRISTMAS CAROL SING WITH COMMUNION

HOSPITALITY TO CHILDREN, YOUTH & YOUNG ADULTS

ADVENT IS NOT CHRISTMAS. SO HOW DO WE DO ADVENT? Yes the stores are playing Christmas music and advertising their holiday sales, but that doesn't mean we should skip over the season of Advent. The next four weeks of preparation require time and space to reflect on what Jesus is bringing into the world on December 25. A resource packet is in the Galahad Area to help your family observe Advent both at church and at home.

TIME TO GET READY FOR THE CHRISTMAS PAGEANT. Calling all actors and actresses from infants to high schoolers to prepare for and participate in the St. Stephen's Christmas Pageant held at the 5:30pm Christmas Eve service. We have parts for all: speakers, readers, singers, watchers, dancers, and sheep! The sign up forms are in the Galahad area and can be given to Dan or Rev. Sarah. Rehearsals will be held after 10:00am worship on Sundays starting November 30. We also need adults to help with organizing, directing, and feeding the cast.

JOIN US FOR THE LAST FAMILY DINNER OF 2014 ON DECEMBER 14! Take a break from making dinner and entertaining the kids for one evening and come to Parish Family Dinner on Sunday, December 14, from 4:30 to 6:30pm. Join other parish and KIC families for supper, conversation, crafts, and a little friendly kids vs. adults competition. Contact Audrey Gutfreund, KIC Director, in the church office or at 617-435-3325 for more information.

KIDS' CHOIR SINGS AGAIN. Kids' Choir will sing on Sunday, December 21 as we focus our worship on the Annunciation. For music education and for performance preparation, young people need to attend Choir Practice Saturdays, December 6 and 20. All young people in 2nd grade and higher are encouraged to join the Choir. We also need parent helpers. Please call the parish office or talk to Juliana Davis for more information.

AFTER SCHOOL KIC STARTS IN FEBRUARY! Are you looking for a new activity for your elementary schooler to do after school? Or, have you ever wanted him/her to come to Kids in Community during the summer, but not been able to, or wished summer KIC was all year? You may be in luck! Beginning February 2nd and running until June, KIC will offer a program most Mondays from 2:00-6:00 pm. Children in grades 2-5 are eligible to participate. Each program day, kids will receive a nutritious snack, homework help, and play games led by teen mentors. Plus, all participants will get to be in two music groups--a choir and a percussion ensemble--that will rehearse each week. Children will sing, drum, clap, and begin to learn how to read and count music. **Registration for After School KIC will begin on Monday, December 8th;** forms will be available in the office and in the Galahad area. A registration fee of \$10 is required. Space is limited, and registration is first come, first serve. (Please note that summer KIC will be continuing, with separate registration in May). We hope you'll come get your groove on with us! KIC school-year expansion is made possible by the Diocesan North Shore Mission Hub, which was announced at Convention last month. Working in collaboration with other congregations in the North Shore Deanery the Hub "seeks to build capacity within and deepen relationships among Episcopal parishes and programs on the North Shore, increasing our visibility and witness as a church committed to honoring the dignity of every human being." Please contact Audrey Gutfreund, KIC Director, in the church office or at 617-435-3325 for more information about KIC. Please contact the Rector, Chris Trahan, Beth Graham, or Irene Axelrod to learn more about the North Shore Mission Hub.

ELF GIFT DISTRIBUTION ON SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21. The people of Trinity Church in Topsfield are eagerly shopping for Elf gifts. If you signed up your child/children for Elf gifts please pick them up after church on Sunday, December 21. Please see Rev. Sarah if this date doesn't work for you.

OASIS TOY DRIVE IS HERE! CPPK 2014 IS GOING STRONG! Families from all over Lynn continue to arrive at our doorstep to sign up their children for Christmas Presents Project for Kids, the OASIS youth group's annual toy drive. Junior and Senior High Schoolers have been getting together after church with Jason Cruz to create handmade art, including awesome puzzle pieces that were sold at Diocesan Convention by kids wearing hot pink t-shirts that read, "I am the future of St. Stephen's Lynn." These brave merchants of Lynn raised a whopping \$860 for CPPK! On December 3rd, OASIS will have another chance to sell their inspiring art as they storm diocesan offices for "Operation 138!" The last day to sign up for gifts is December 5th (4:30-6pm). Shopping Day is happening on the 13th (9am-2pm) and Distribution Day is on the 18th (3-6pm). Please let Dan Bell know if you'd like to donate money, a gift, and/or your time to support CPPK 2014. We definitely need help with transport on the 13th and organizing bags December 14-17. Thanks!

YOUTH CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION DECEMBER 19. Middle and High School youth will celebrate the end of CPPK with super fun Christmas Fun Night. Plans are evolving, which means now is the time to make suggestions to Rev. Sarah, Jason, and Dan. Eat in or dine out? Play games or create a work of art? Go to a movie or go bowling? With the Fair, Convention, and CPPK, it's been a busy fall for teens. Now is the time to get together for FUN!

REGISTER NOW FOR BCH IN FEBRUARY. Senior High Retreat February 6-8. Winter Camp for grades 7-9 February 16-21. For fun-filled faith or faithful fun, tweens and teens are invited to register now for time at BCH in February. You can register online at bchcenter.org or see Rev. Sarah. Scholarships are available but spaces fill up fast!

YOUNG ADULT DINNER DECEMBER 9: FOOD, FUN, AND CONVERSATION. In November, YAs gathered again for dinner and conversation hosted by Dan Bell and Jason Cruz. The chilly night called for some hot chili, which folks ate eagerly! After checking in on how everyone was doing, Dan showed a brief video presentation by Br. Curtis Almquist from SSJE called "Gratitude: Life is Gift." YAs were then invited to chat about whether they thought gratitude is an attitude worth having. One person shared that he always begins his prayers by saying thanks and talked about why he found that to be an important spiritual practice. While recognizing that it's not always easy to give thanks amid life's challenges, folks seemed to agree that it's still worthwhile to do. The next dinner is on December 9th at 6:30. All young adults (18-25) are warmly invited!

A DREAM COME TRUE: JULIANA DAVIS ON CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP. In October and November, St. Stephen's offered a contemporary-style worship service one Sunday evening a month. In November, Juliana Davis, a band from Berklee College of Music, and members of the Kids Choir led inspiring music for those gathered in Lawrence Hall for worship. Dan Bell gave a message on celebrating the lights in our lives and invited folks to a time of journaling, reflection, and conversation. The service ended in prayer led by Rev. Sarah and a closing song, followed by food and fellowship. These times of worship have been particularly meaningful for Juliana, as she shares here: "As a child growing up at St. Stephen's, I never understood why there was no choir for me to sing in, or why we always sang traditional music. I loved the idea of praising God through song, but the traditional language and style didn't work for me. I dreamed of bringing contemporary worship to St. Stephen's. More than 10 years later, it's a blessing to have done just that! We have created an alternative atmosphere for people to freely worship and praise God in their own way! Through live contemporary music, relatable and personable messages, and fellowship, we now have a space that caters to our younger generations. I invite and encourage you, no matter your age or background, to join us in worship Sunday December 14, 2014 at 6:30pm. Come and join our growing community of believers." "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise." (Psalms 98:4 KJV).

CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP DECEMBER 14 AT 6:30—DREAMS & VISIONS. Advent is full of angels appearing to ordinary people and making their lives extraordinary. Our December Worship will focus on Dreams and Visions: What is God Growing in You? Come sing, dance, pray, and contemplate what's coming to life in and through you. The music rocks but any and all ages are welcome as we "come into God's presence with song." (*Psalm 100*)

DEEPENING COMMUNITY COMMITMENT

ECCO ANNUAL MEETING DECEMBER 2 at 6:00. On Tuesday, December 2 representatives from the 26 ECCO congregations and community groups will gather at St. John the Baptist RC Church in Peabody to celebrate. Dinner is Potluck and the program will involve a lot of cheering and community congratulations. This year ECCO worked with the Raise Up Massachusetts Campaign to persuade the legislature to raise the minimum wage to \$11. An hour making it the highest minimum wage in the country, and to pass Ballot Question 4 providing nearly one million Massachusetts workers with earned sick time. In addition, ECCO has met with local and national leaders to advocate for immigration reform, the safe driver bill, and compassionate hospitality for unaccompanied children coming to the US to escape poverty and violence in their homelands. Finally, ECCO leaders met with Governor-elect Charlie Baker right here in the Graham Suite, and Congressman-elect Seth Moulton agreed during ECCO's Congressional Candidates' Forum held in Lawrence Hall to meet with ECCO leaders within 30 days of his election. The St. Stephen's ECCO Team led by Debbie Potter knocked on lots of doors and made many phone calls to educate voters and to turn out the vote on November 4. **Now is the time to celebrate an amazing year of building power and making a difference in the lives of people on the North Shore. Come to the ECCO Annual Meeting on Tuesday, December 2.** And, in January, join St. Stephen's and ECCO in imagining where and how God might want us working for justice and reconciliation in our community.

THE TABLE TEAM MADE FOX NEWS! On Sunday, November 23 the Fox News Team came to My Brother's Table to film a segment on the rising numbers of homeless and hungry people in the Boston area. Thanksgiving week, Fox aired the segment multiple times to encourage people to contribute to programs that feed and house the hungry. St. Stephen's and First Lutheran volunteers are visible throughout the segment as they prepared and served Sunday dinner. **Our famous Table Team will serve again on Sunday, December 28.** Christmas week is hard for many of the regulars at the Table, and new people often show up after Christmas having over-spent during the holidays. Contribute Christmas desserts or join us at the Table from 1:00 to 4:00 on the 28th as we spread Christmas cheer.

COATS IN GOOD CONDITION NEEDED FOR THE TABLE. Scripture tells us to give our coat and shirt to the needy. While we don't want you to donate your only coat, we are collecting coats in good condition for children and adults to give to folks at My Brother's Table.

KEEP OUR PANTRY SHELVES FULL. In recent weeks the lines have been long at our Pantry. The Sacred Heart Food Pantry consolidated operations at St. Mary's in October resulting in longer lines at the remaining pantries. Many thanks to everyone who contributed to the Church School Can Drive and to Turkey Tuesday through which we distributed the makings for over 70 Thanksgiving dinners. All contributions are welcome but canned tuna and chicken, beef stew, and spaghetti sauce are always good choices. Also, we could always use extra volunteers at the Pantry. Talk to Sally Gosselin, Harry Jackson, or Neil O'Donnell if you want to volunteer on Friday afternoons.