



415 Pennsylvania Avenue ♦ Oakmont, PA 15139
(412) 828-5770 ♦ (412) 828-0907 Fax

November 23, 2020

Beloved in Christ,

A Prayer of Thanksgiving – *Strong Shepherd of Your people, You heard the cry of Your Son when he stretched out his hands on the cross, and You hear us when we lift our hands in prayer to You. Strengthen us to offer you thanks for the mighty works that You have done and make our hearts dance for joy; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*¹

We apologize for a **glitch in the livestreaming of worship yesterday**. The fix has been made and a recording of yesterday's worship has been posted. We will be livestreaming worship Sundays at 11 a.m. (www.oakmontpresbyterianchurch.org) and later post each worship service as a recording. Thank you to Ron Burkert and our new AV Team for their dedicated work in this transition!

Because we were not able to hold a congregational meeting last Sunday, we are mailing to you a copy of our 2021 narrative budget which shows what your contributions are accomplishing. A copy of the draft 2021 line-item budget is available in the church office. Questions or comments may be made to the elders or to me (swilson@oakmontpresby.org).

Thank you for your contributions! While some have been unable to contribute during this time, others have maintained their contributions, and some have made second mile gifts! Your gifts, along with a Payment Protection Program grant from the US government, have enabled the ministries and mission of the church to continue. With vaccines available in the coming months we look forward to a time when we may gather again in-person for worship, study and service.

Estimates of Giving for 2021 – as of November 17th we have received estimates of giving totaling \$293,551 toward our reduced budget of \$600,000. While we are nearly half-way toward our 2021 goal, our Generosity & Finance committee has expressed concern that we are over \$100,000 short of last year's returned estimates at this time. If you have not yet returned your estimate of giving card you may call the church office (412.828.5770) to receive another card, or you may make your confidential estimate of giving on-line at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScDcqXhk4xN2kepvuLvTwAT9AgeN-5BH35rsPAqGcmiP6U2qw/viewform>. Near the bottom of the church website click on "2021 Estimate of Giving" and then click on "Click Here to Complete the Estimate of Giving Web Form". Your form will be seen only by our Financial Secretary for Contributions.

This year's **Hope for the Holidays worship** will be posted at on our church website. The Holy Ground Team that planned and hosted the worship hopes that it will be a blessing to you.

Yours in Christ,
Steve

¹ PCUSA Book of Common Worship, prayer for Psalm 28, p. 951



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Beloved in Christ,

Given the rising cases of COVID-19 and the Allegheny County health department's stay at home advisory **Session through its Administrative Committee has suspended in-person worship and all group meetings for the duration of the stay at home advisory.** Worship will be livestreamed Sundays at 11 am with a recording of the worship service available a short time later. To watch the livestream go to the OPC website (www.oakmontpresbyterianchurch.org) and click on *Current Worship Service*. A weekly bulletin will be accessible immediately below the current worship tab. Though, for a time, we will not be meeting in the church we remain a community of faith connected in and through Christ and through our personal contacts and prayers.

For many of us Thanksgiving plans have changed, and many will be staying home to stay safe. That does not mean that our thanksgivings have changed. I have often noticed when visiting people in the hospital how grateful they are for: a caring and competent doctor, responsive medical staff, family members and friends whose love is an encouragement, and the knowledge that day and night God is present to them. Even though we will be having an adapted celebration I am grateful that we will have time this week to pause and thank God for our many blessings.

Advent begins this coming Sunday. Our worship theme will be *Meeting Jesus Again This Year* and will focus on the royal titles for Jesus given in Isaiah 9:6 - *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace.*

As we continue to live through the pandemic, we are mindful that some are suffering from COVID weariness. **One thing we can do for family, friends and neighbors** is to check in with them. As you do please call the church office with any updates you want to pass along.

This year's **Hope for the Holidays worship** will be posted at www.oakmontpresbyterianchurch.org. The Holy Ground Ministry Team that planned and hosted the worship hopes that it will be a blessing to you.

With God's help we will get through this together.

Yours in Christ,

Steve



November 2020

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we approach the 2020 Advent season, Your Holy Ground Ministry Team would like to reach out to you in addition to our "Hope for the Holiday" service which is usually held on the first Sunday afternoon of Advent. This year a recorded service is available on the OPC website which will include a special message by our own Dr. Lin Ewing.

How do you continue to cope with the various changes and losses in your life not the least of which is separation from family and friends, changes in work requirements, the need for home educational accommodations and the modifications to our loved holiday traditions? As Steve mentioned in his last letter to the congregation, we are affirmed by the Psalmist's assurance in Psalm 46:1 that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." We also are encouraged by the words from Eugene Peterson's translation of the first beatitude from The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3) stating that "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you ...there is more of God and his rule." I think many of us are feeling we are near the end of our patience and our attitudes might need an adjustment. We need to create our own private sanctuary.

Emboldened by knowing that God is our refuge: we take heart. Perhaps the words of this poem will be encouraging.

THE SANCTUARY

Above the toils of life: the hardship and the pain,
Behind the dreary storm front,
The seemingly endless rain...
There exists a peaceful sanctuary.

A place of warming sunshine,
A meadow of pure happiness
Erasing scars of hard times.

Somewhat romantic or fictitious
This philosophy you may find,
But to endure this life's misfortunes,
It must flourish in your mind.

Robert W. Richardson, Jr. 1990

(continued on back)

Everyone experiences loss and life changes differently. It is important to be able to express our concerns and worries. Please feel free and safe to reach out to Pastors Steve (swilson@oamontpresby.org) or Don (dewing@oamontpresby.org) or to a member of the Holy Ground Ministry Team (through the church office at 412.828.5770). Despite the fact that we hear repeatedly...We will get through this together: We will! Please reach out to others.

An idea to help focus on God's promise that He is with us always, might be to have a candle lighting service at home on each Sunday of Advent. This can be done with a single candle each time or with a series of four candles in a wreath. For children, a candle in a cupcake(s) each Sunday of Advent celebrating the coming birthday of the Christ child might be memorable. Included with this mailing are some suggestions of Scripture that you may want to include for your candle lighting as well as some other inspirational poetry.

Included with this letter is a pamphlet that has some thoughts, encouragement and prayers to help us find some calm and peace during this busy but very different Advent season. Also included is a printed copy of the message provided by Dr. Lin Ewing that can be listened to on the OPC website (www.oakmontpresbyterianchurch.org).

This year, COVID has caused changes in our lives and family times but we need to remind ourselves that the Lord is still in control, even when the world situation is so unsettling. The Christ child came to bring hope and healing in our world. It is in God's love and the loving care of one another that we find calm and peace.

The Holy Ground Ministry Team prays that you and your loved ones will have a very blessed Advent season and a joyful celebration of our Lord's birth. We hope you are able to establish that peaceful sanctuary within that is available to us.

Blessings

Your Holy Ground Ministry Team

Readings for Encouragement in This Advent Season

Two Reflections by Ann Weems

TOWARD THE LIGHT

“Too often our answer to the darkness is not running toward Bethlehem but running away. We ought to know by now that we can’t see where we are going in the dark. Running away is rampant.... Separation is stylish.... When are we going to learn that Christmas Peace comes only when we face the darkness? Only then will we be able to see the Light of the World.”

GODBURST

“When the Holy Child is born into our hearts
there is a rain of stars
A rushing of angels
a blaze of candles
this God burst into our lives.
Love is running through the streets.”

PERMISSION TO CHANGE TRADITIONS *(from Thoughts for the Holidays by Doug Manning)*

Every family has their own traditions that often have developed over several generations. These can become almost sacred within the family and there may be great resistance to any changes offered, but some traditions must be either changed or at least put aside for a time.

Our grandson, Isaac, was born on Christmas Eve and died on Christmas Day. When he died, our Christmas holidays changed forever. As the first one approached, I had to try to figure out what was appropriate. What traditions could remain and which ones had to change. We had to figure out how to honor the holidays at the same time we were experiencing the anniversary of his death.

Over the seven years since Isaac died, we have evolved our own tradition. Just before the family opens presents, we pause to remind the family how old Isaac would be and how we would have enjoyed him in the same way we enjoy our other grandchildren. Then a candle is lit in his honor. For the first several years, I always produced the candle and led the service. Gradually the grandchildren have taken on the task on their own initiative. In this small way, we keep Isaac alive in our memories and in our family.

Many families plant trees, or find some other permanent memorial that can be shared at this time. You must feel free to change any tradition necessary and to start new ones in honor of the person who has died.

Taken from *(A Gift of Hope by Robert L. Veninga)*

Human pain works its way out of our consciousness over time. There is a season of sadness. A season of anger. A season of tranquility. A season of hope. But seasons do not follow one another in a lockstep manner. At least not for those in crisis.

The winters and springs of one's life are all jumbled together in a puzzling array. One day we feel as though the dark clouds have lifted, but the next day they have returned. One moment we can smile, but a few hours later the tears emerge. It is true that as we take two steps forward in our journey, we may take one or more steps backward. But when one has faith that the spring thaw will arrive, the winter winds seem to lose some of their punch!

Listening to Your Life by Frederick Buechner

Love yourself as your neighbor. Love yourself, not in some egocentric, self-serving sense, but love yourself the way you would love your friend, in the sense of taking care of yourself, nourishing yourself, trying to understand, comfort, strengthen yourself.

Advent Means 'Coming'

A Simple Candle Lighting Practice for Advent

Each week light a candle, read a Scripture and pray for Christ's coming into your heart.

Here is a sample prayer:

*God of light, who came into a world of darkness and never left it,
We invite you to be present on the lighting of this candle.*

Week 1 or November 29th: PEACE

Observe a brief time of silence

Light a candle

Read Isaiah 7:14

What message of peace do you hear from this Scripture?

Offer the prayer above or one of your own.

Week 2 or December 6th: HOPE

Observe a brief time of silence

Light a candle

Read Matthew 1:18-25

What message of hope do you hear from this Scripture?

Offer the prayer above or one of your own.

Week 3 or December 13th: JOY

Observe a brief time of silence

Light a candle

Read Luke 1:26-38

What message of joy do you hear from this Scripture?

Offer the prayer above or one of your own.

Week 4 or December 20th: LOVE

Observe a brief time of silence

Light a candle

Read Luke 2:1-20

What message of love do you hear from this Scripture?

Offer the prayer above or one of your own.

Hope for the Holidays
Presentation by
OPC Member and Elder
Lin Ewing, Ph.D.

First Reflection: On Allowing Our Self to Feel the Pain

We gather here today because we are anticipating that Christmas may be difficult this year. There are many possible reasons for that. Perhaps a loved one has died, a mother, father, a child, a sister or brother, an aunt, uncle or cousin, or a dear friend with whom you have shared precious moments; perhaps a relationship is falling apart; perhaps you or someone you love is dealing with a serious illness; perhaps you are painfully lonely and sad as you anticipate the coming season without being able to be with family due either to the pandemic or some other barrier; perhaps you are under enormous stress from job loss, economic fears, or uncertainty about the future. Perhaps you just get down at Christmas time, or your struggle with depression and loneliness is magnified. Whatever it is, you know that life is sometimes hard. And you know that when life is hard at Christmastime, it can feel almost unbearably difficult. Although grief is something that is experienced daily, holidays, especially Christmas, tend to amplify feelings of loss, especially the first holiday season since the loss. It reminds you that everything has changed for you, that everything is different than it used to be. There is palpable dissonance between you feeling heartbroken and those around you feeling joyful and expectant. One of the things that teaches us the reality of our loss or emotional pain and distress is, in fact, holidays in general, and Christmas very specifically.

While Christmas is the happiest time of year for some, and perhaps often the happiest time of year for you, this year it is likely to be different. One of the reasons for this is that the way we celebrate Christmas in our culture is all about the past...about reliving memories of past celebrations. For many families, Christmas involves traditions: certain foods, certain rituals at certain people's homes. Traditions are intended to offer comfort in a world that keeps changing. Traditions include rituals of worship, of wonderful music that binds us to our faith, our family, our past and even to our future. In this way, Christmas joy is about the past, which often is fine and good, except when things change, and when we are suffering a loss or losses in our lives. Christmas just makes it so much worse. Some part of us longs to have the joy of Christmases past to restore us, but at the same time, we just cannot get there!

So, for now we gather to hear quieter music and to sit in stillness and reflection. Now we gather as darkness threatens to overtake the light and we wonder: will darkness overshadow everything? But still we gather in the darkness of our grief and our loss, to name our own darkness and fear. It is difficult to feel such depth and weight and sadness and blues in the time of year when the expectations are so high and the demand for joyfulness is so great.

But we stay here in this moment because we know that the only road through the darkness into the light, the only way to where-ever we need to be physically and emotionally for Christmas is through the honesty of tears and grief and the whole complex of other feelings we may feel because we are alive and we have depth. And we know that honesty about these feelings and this truth, and not a mask of smiles and a façade of cheer, is the only way to true, deep, profound joy.

So it is important for you to know that it's ok and necessary to feel sad and lonely when others feel happy; it's ok to feel pain in the midst of holiday celebrations; it's ok to be scared and anxious when those around you appear joyful and secure. And, it's also ok to feel joy amid grief and sadness; to celebrate even in difficult times; to share moments of laughter even in the face of illness and grief.

Christ is with us in all of it as God's own compassion. It is clear throughout Scripture that because God is above all love and compassion, God's mercy and peace is offered abundantly to those in darkness, those in grief, the poor, the sick, those who feel hopeless. The powerful truth is, for those whose Christmas is filled with questioning, with sadness, with fear, with loss of a loved one, of security, of confidence, and even of faith, for those who can't hold back the tears, those who know darkness and grief and pain, also know the depth of the good news of God in a way that those who **only** sing carols of joy cannot know.

Those of you here at this dark time in your life, this is the time when God's light shines the brightest BECAUSE we come together in the honesty of life's struggle and still see the light shine.

THE END OF THE FIRST REFLECTION



Second Reflection: On Honoring the Pain at Christmas

Psychologists who study grief, loss and mourning have emphasized the importance for those who are experiencing loss to be intentional about allowing themselves to acknowledge and feel painful feelings, and to acknowledge that their feelings may be different this year than others; feelings also may be different from the feelings of those with whom you may be gathering. This year, I invite you to honor your pain, for it is real. Do not put it on a shelf, and say, it's Christmastime and thus I need to be happy. Your sadness is real, and it's alright to feel that way.

It does not matter if this is the first Christmas holiday, or the 5th, or the 25th after your loss, whatever that loss is. Because the holiday itself is one that is anchored in precious memories, the mixed feelings of sadness and joy that, at other times of the year are less pronounced, may even surprise us a bit when they come upon us.

I love the words of the poet, Rumi:

“Your wound is the place where the light enters you.”

Acknowledging your wound and the feelings it evokes gives us opportunity for healing.

What does it mean to honor your pain? For one thing, it means that you allow your pain to be witnessed by those around you who love you. In his book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, David Kessler notes that each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. However, what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. I imagine every one of us has had the experience of healing connection with another who is able to be with us in our pain, our disappointment, our longing, and our deep sadness; they offer us the profound gift of validating what is real for us, and honoring the meaning of that loss for us. That doesn't mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining. This need is hardwired in us, since our emotions bind us to one another, and in those bonds is the key to our survival. Honoring your pain is a way of honoring your loved one. You

are a living demonstration to those around you by how you grieve and mourn. There is no right or wrong way to manage the experience and feelings of great loss, however, the honest way to do that is to be with the pain for the time that is needed, and in so doing, honoring yourself as the person enduring the loss.

According to those who have studied grief honoring your pain at this Christmas is recognizing that the holidays will be different, and to be proactive about what helps and what doesn't. This year especially will be different for many of us who are experiencing the sadness of missing family and friend gatherings because of the pandemic. We may collectively have some real concern as we anticipate and have anxiety about being alone and lonely at a season that is otherwise filled with togetherness, shared meals and events, shared worship experiences, the joys of young grandchildren visiting, and other special events that are part of our Christmas traditions. Many of these will be different or missing this year. We need to honor our feelings and acknowledge our sadness, even as we think about how we can safely celebrate, perhaps creating new traditions in the process.

For those for whom this is the first Christmas after a loss, planning is a concrete way of honoring the significance of the loss and your pain. Thinking ahead about traditions you would rather not do this year; thinking ahead about where you want to celebrate and with whom; making a plan if it is possible to be certain to include those whose presence is the source of peace and healing, even if that means a telephone call or a face time visit. Thinking ahead about how much time you can actually be with anyone or, conversely, be alone without having a planned connection. It is also true that all of this takes energy that any of us who is grieving may not have. Thus, this is the time when those of us who know of friends, families who are fearing Christmas because of a recent loss, reaching out to them in advance to offer connection around the holiday by way of phone, an outdoor visit, a planned walk is so important. Doing so will be a gift that you give them and yourself.

If the loss is due to the death of a loved one, a key component to honoring is in creating a way to include the memory of the lost one in the celebration. Hopefully, the grieving person will be able to talk about Mom on the holiday. It's important to hear Mom's name, or to remember how every year she would burn those beans or make the best snickerdoodles you ever had. My mother died 10 years ago, around the holiday, and it continues to bring me both solace and joy to include in our celebrations ornaments from her tree, foods that she included in our Christmas dinners, and ways that she remembered others at Christmas...baking cookies and giving them as gifts. Some other creative ways I've heard to include cherished memories are:

- Doing an activity that the loved one enjoyed or always wanted to do.
- Gathering notes and stories about the loved one and putting them in a stocking or box to read aloud at the end of the gathering.
- Creating a table centerpiece with a photo or items the loved one found meaningful.
- Giving gifts in honor of the loved one.
- Continuing a tradition, especially one that children may have shared with the loved one.

What is vitally important is that we make it personal and meaningful for ourselves.

Honoring our grief, our loss, our fear, our pain also includes:

1. Crying when you feel like crying, not holding back tears, but allowing them to flow; each release can lead to feeling a bit lighter of heart and spirit.
2. Taking some time to be alone with your thoughts. Take sufficient time to sit and be quiet and remember all the precious moments you spent with your loved one. If it is not the death of someone you are grieving, but some other loss, reflect on the meaning of what has

been lost in your life, and allow yourself to be compassionate for all the feelings that emerge as you do so.

3. Giving generously this year whether it be of your time or of other resources. It is well known that giving heals the human heart. The giving does not need to be big to bring healing to another or oneself. Being generous could be as simple as posting a kind word online to a newly bereaved or suffering person. You, as someone who knows how the worst possible pain feels also knows the comfort of a kind word or loving gesture.

For those of you who will be supporting someone who is experiencing sadness this Christmas, allowing them to cry whenever they want or need to and being the witness that each of us needs when we are grieving is a gift. Encouraging them to share their memories of their loved one, memories of holidays past, and giving them space to be alone with their thoughts are all important.

As Christians, honoring our pain acknowledges that our Truth is the authority of Scripture:

The good news of God comes to those in darkness:
to those who are waiting with perhaps just a thread of hope to cling to;
to those who have nearly given up;
to those who know sorrow, loss, deep sadness, and tears.

Isaiah's profound words of good news comfort us:

²The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —
on them light has shined.

THE END OF THE SECOND REFLECTION



Third Reflection: On Living into Light and Hope

A portion of my career was spent in my research lab at Pitt where I with my colleagues focused on developing helpful ways for families with a child newly diagnosed with cancer to cope and move through a dreadful time in their lives. As I started my research in that area, I spent a considerable amount of time in the pediatric cancer inpatient unit at Children's Hospital learning directly from children and their parents about the specific stressors they faced following their child's diagnosis. I came to know some of these children and their parents quite well over the weeks and sometimes months of hospitalization and rehospitalization. I learned something very important one day from a 9 year old child who had been in the hospital for quite a while, was enduring difficult treatment, and was doing well physically, but over the course of several weeks, it was clear that he was experiencing depression. His parents and physicians were concerned of course but no medical cause for his decline was able to be identified. At about the same time, his school had decided that they could send one of their 'traveling teachers' to the hospital to actually spend some time with him going over some school assignments and bringing some greetings from his classmates as well. The teacher arrived, spent about an hour with the child, visiting and delivering assignments. Something that seemed like a miracle occurred. The miracle was apparent the next day to his parents and physicians. Overnight this child's 'spirit' had returned; he was bright, talkative, smiling, and, had apparent energy that had not been seen for a while. When asked about how he was feeling and what had happened, the child said that the teacher would not have brought assignments to a child that was dying; that thought enabled him to conclude that he must

not be dying after all! What his physicians, his parents and I witnessed was hope being restored by the simple action of his teacher of focusing on his future and thus leading him to envision a future again.

What is hope? We use the word frequently, and we know what we feel when we are hopeful and when we are not hopeful, but I thought I would look into the definitions a bit more to see what I could learn. I found three ways that we use the word hope:

1. Hope is the desire for something good in the future.
2. Hope is the good thing in the future that we are desiring now.
3. Hope is the reason why our hope might indeed come to pass.

The most important aspect of Biblical hope is not present in any of these ordinary uses of the word hope. In fact, the distinctive meaning of hope in scripture is almost the opposite of our ordinary usage. It is opposite in this sense: ordinarily, when we use the word hope, we express uncertainty rather than certainty.

“I hope daddy gets home early” means “I don’t have any certainty that daddy will get home on time, I only desire that he does.”

OR

“Our hope is that Jim will arrive safely,” means, “We don’t know if he will or not, but that is our desire.”

These examples illustrate the uncertainty in our everyday expression of hope. But this is NOT the distinctive Biblical meaning of hope. Biblical hope is not just a desire for something good in the future, but rather, Biblical hope is a confident expectation of something good in the future. Biblical hope is the certainty that the good we expect, and desire will be done.

This is the hope that my 9-year old friend with cancer expressed the morning after his teacher visited and he again was certain of something good in the future.

To those whose burdens in life are real this moment as we approach Christmas, whose sadness, fear, and anxiety are felt as a heavy weight, and to those who desperately need relief, and confidence for something good in the future, Jesus says:

²⁸Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.

²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.

for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.

³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Jesus is speaking to those whose burden in life is felt as heavy and who need relief and restored hope, or in the certainty that the good we desire will be done.

It probably is not coincidental that our celebration of Christmas, of Jesus birth, is timed to coincide with other solstice celebrations occurring when darkness was at its apex, and the light was most needed and shone most beautifully. And this light, and this hope, we say with humble trust and quiet joy, this light is Christ, God’s own self embedded in human life so that human life could be lifted to the divine life. Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.
(Desmond Tutu)

The good news, the hope-filled news is the incarnation. It says that divine love and mercy will not remain distant concepts for us, but that God is embodying divine love and mercy in real human flesh and blood, the child who brings light, and joy, and hope, Jesus.

As we approach this season of light that pierces our personal darkness we are reminded of the incarnation and of God moving into our tears and our laughter, our joy and our sorrow, our fear and our courage, our life and our death, our despair, and our hope.

Only in the stark contrasts of these things of darkness and light do we come to see the meaning of our lives and the infinite greatness of God's love and mercy.

This gathering and all gatherings of people in the church are wrapped in the good news of God in Christ. There is indeed a mixture of tears of joy and tears of sorrow, tears of hope and tears of despair and fear, tears of laughter and tears of regret, tears of grief and tears of new birth. When we gather in God's infinite love and mercy, what we have to offer to God anyway is our blessed tears and our confident hope in what is good.

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May you feel comfort and care in this time knowing that God is with you as you wail, as you carry your heavy burden; in your feelings of hopeless; in your despair, in your season of bitterness and anger, when you are overcome with grief and sorrow, and when you can see only darkness. God the Father is with you in the depth of your pain, holding you in love and compassion, and calling you toward the light of love and hope.

THE END OF THE THIRD REFLECTION