

GraceNotes



A Monthly Publication of the Congregational Activities of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Newton, NC
Volume 221, Number 1 January 2018

Behold, I am making all things new. Revelation 21:5

*WILL YOU BECOME A NEW
CREATION IN 2018? STUDY THE
SCRIPTURES, WORSHIP, PARTICIPATE
IN LEARNING HOUR AND
CONNECTIONS BIBLE STUDY. FORM
A DEEPER RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS
AND ALL WILL BE BLESSED.*

January 6th



From the Pastor's Pen.....



My Brothers and Sisters in Christ at Grace Church,

The end of one year and the beginning of another is usually a time to look back to what has been and to look forward to what can be. To look back - or not to look back - includes both the positive, as well as the negative things. We can choose to sit back and complain about things that we don't like, or we can choose to support and defend those things and realize that they come from God for our own good. I can assure you that nothing at Grace will ever be done without God's guidance by myself, or the Leadership Board. To look forward to what can be or should be possible is also an important exercise.

The prophet Joel, inspired by God, spoke as follows: "I will pour out my Spirit on all mankind. Your old people shall dream dreams and your young people shall see visions".

It is important to dream, to try to imagine how we can help in some small way to make the world a better world. "I have a dream", these words have been immortalized by Rev. Martin L. King, Jr. The dream was a clear vision of where he wanted to take his people: calling them from bondage to freedom. It was like an Exodus event. Not all of us are called in this way to be leaders. But all of us are called to make our own contribution to its fulfillment. ALL of us are called to make a difference in our own life, at Grace Church, as well as in the lives of others.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, writes about the mystery hidden for all ages in God and which now has been made known to us in Christ. It is the dream or vision of God's plan for the world and the mission of the Church in that plan: to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

Jesus, our Savior and God, became man to give us full freedom as sons and daughters of God. In Jesus, and with Jesus, we can realize all our dreams and hopes because he said: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart: and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light".

As we enter into the New Year of 2018, we greet you and convey our love and hope on this blessed occasion. We extend our wishes that the New Year be one filled with faith, hope, love, joy, and prosperity for us all. May this new year be an occasion of spiritual renewal and growth. May our Lord and Savior be the One to whom we can turn in our weak, joyful and painful moments. May He be our rock, our shelter and our strength. A **HAPPY AND BLESSED NEW YEAR 2018!**

In Him,
Pr. Gil Gilbert, STS

WORSHIP ASSISTANTS FOR JANUARY

- ❖ Communion Assistants - Ricky & Cindy Bivens
- ❖ Ushers - Don Jarrett, Jack Wilfong
- ❖ Greeter - Betty Wilfong
- ❖ Altar Preparation - Jackie Jarrett, Jill Matthews
- ❖ Children's Church and Nursery - Shelly Scronce, Pat Dietz
- ❖ Offering Tabulators - Ricky Bivens, Mike Pisko

Please be mindful of your commitment to serve. If you are unable to fulfill that commitment, be reminded that it is your responsibility to find someone to serve in your place.

FLOWER CHART FOR JANUARY



1/07 - Lorene Heavner
1/21 - OPEN

1/14 - OPEN
1/28 - OPEN

If you wish to give the flowers for a given Sunday, please list your name on the chart in the narthex. *You are responsible for ordering the flowers from a florist of your choice; we do not have a standing order with any florist.* The liturgical color of the day is listed to assist you in selecting flowers appropriate for that Sunday. You should contact the Church Office so that the correct information is placed in the bulleting for that Sunday. Please notify the Church Office the Thursday prior to your selected Sunday. You can call the Church Office between 9 AM and Noon each weekday, leave a note on the desk, or send an email to let us know the occasion or memoriam for this wonderful gift of beatification of the worship.

ATTENDANCE AND GIVING TO OUR LORD'S WORK FOR DECEMBER 2017

	12/03/17	12/10/17	12/17/17	12/24/17 AM
Learning Hour	37	0 (snow)	35	32
Worship	90	66	90	80
General Fund Offerings	6,414.00	789.00	2,414.00	1,910.85

General Fund **Offerings, November 2017** = \$ 11,391.78

General Fund **Expenses, November 2017** = \$ 13,712.43

Difference = - \$ 2,320.65 (expenses exceeded offerings)

Needed Each Week = \$3,257.94

THE FRED T. FOARD SENIORS will meet at Noon on Wednesday, January 3rd, at Wesley Chapel. Everyone is invited to these gatherings. (LH)

FIRST SUNDAY BREAKFAST will be held January 7th at 9:00 AM in Fellowship Hall. Frankie Crouse, Doug & Jackie Jarrett, Martha Johnson, and Scott & Carolyn Whisnant will provide the breakfast. Suggested freewill offering is \$3.00.

YOUR HELP IS NEEDED to remove the Christmas Decorations. Please gather with us Wednesday evening, January 3rd, at 5:30 PM. Many hands make the job easier. The decorations need gathered, disassembled and stored for next Christmas.

SECOND SUNDAY LUNCH will be served January 14th in Fellowship Hall following Worship. The meal will be furnished by the Leadership Ministry Board and will consist of Chili, potatoes, slaw, bread, desert, and drinks. Plan to stay for the food and fellowship. Suggested freewill offering is \$3.00.

THE MEN OF GRACE will meet on Saturday, January 13th, at 9:00 AM at Four Peas in a Pod Restaurant on Hwy. 70 in Conover (in the shopping strip beside Walgreen's and Cook Out).. Bring a friend! (PG)

THE GRACE SENIOR LUNCHEON GROUP will meet on Wednesday, January 17th, from noon until 2:00 PM. Come join the fun and fellowship. All are welcome!

THE OFFERINGS FOR SAMARITAN'S PURSE DISASTER RELIEF are still being accepted, however the envelopes are now located in the Narthex. You can also include the offering in your weekly offering envelope clearly marked for Samaritan's Purse Disaster Relief.. These offerings will go to help victims of the hurricanes, earthquakes, or where ever it may be needed. May God move us to continue our support of those in need.

PHONE TREE MESSAGES sometimes do not give the entire message. If this happens, please call the Church Office and let us know exactly what happened. They need to know the phone number, the day, and whether you answered or if it was on the answering machine. If you answer the phone and get the end of the message, stay on the line a little while as the message will often start over from the beginning. We are happy to try to correct these problems if you report them to us. The company that provides this service also stated that back ground noises can sound like the answering machine beeps, so the message will start over. So try to limit back ground noises when possible.

CHURCH DIRECTORY UPDATES:

Mary Biggerstaff - c/o Trinity Village, 1265 21st Street NE Room 413, Hickory, NC 28601

Charles Wilfong - c/o Abernethy Laurels, 102 Leonard Avenue Room 511, Newton, NC 28658

New Members - Danny Robertson, Emily Robertson, Jane Robertson, PO Box 1122, Newton, NC 28658. Danny's phone number is 828-461-0641 & Jane's is 704-462-2768.

THROUGH THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY BAPTISM we welcomed into the Family of God, Emiley Kate-Lynn Elizabeth Robertson, on December 24, 2017. Emiley is the daughter of Danny Robertson and granddaughter of Jane Robertson. Danny was received into membership at Grace at the same time by Letter of Transfer from St. Stephens Lutheran Church. Jane renewed her membership at Grace by Affirmation of Faith. Please make this family welcome as they join the Grace Family.

A SECURITY SEMINAR will be held at Grace on Sunday, January 21st, immediately after worship. This will be lead by Jason Reed from the Sherriff's Department with the purpose of bringing items to our attention so that we may stay safe especially at worship. All are invited to attend.

WORSHIP ASSISTANTS are needed to serve in 2018. Those willing to serve as Lectors, Ushers, Communion Assistants, Communion Preparers, Greeter, Children's Church and Nursery are asked to contact Joy Heavner. Training for each of these responsibilities is offered by Pastor Gilbert as needed. Youth are expected to serve as acolytes and worship assistants.

NORTH CAROLINA LUTHERANS FOR LIFE will be hosting a pro-life seminar on Sunday, January 28th, from 3:00 to 4:30 PM with refreshments and fellowship following. The guest presenter will be Rev. Michael Saleminck, the Executive Director of Lutherans for Life. His presentation is entitled: "Going Gracefully: Accompanied Suffering Instead of Assisted Suicide". Our society is currently pushing elderly and infirm people to choose death rather than life. Many families in recent years have felt the push of the current health care system to "allow" their loved one to die and struggled to know how to respond. What is the alternative to this current system with its push toward death? Please come and take part in this important seminar. The seminar will take place at St. John's Lutheran Church of Conover. Please call 828-464-4071 for more information or directions.

READING THE WORD OF GOD, a daily Bible reading guide, has been prepared for Lutherans to use over the next three years. The North American Lutheran Church has joined with the Lutheran Church-Canada and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to compile a three-year plan of *daily* Bible readings and a year-long series of *weekly* readings on Martin Luther's approach to the Scriptures.

The daily readings are listed on calendars for **2018**, **2019** and **2020**. The plan provides a guide that will take the reader through the entire Old Testament one time in three years, with the exception of Psalms, which are read twice each year. The New Testament will be read twice in the three years.

A reading from the Old Testament, a psalm (or portion of a psalm) and a reading from the New Testament are assigned for each day. Certain church festivals - Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and so forth - have readings appointed for the specific occasion.

As a companion to the *Daily Reading Guide*, the participants of the NALC-LCC-LCMS consultation are also offering selected readings from the work, **Luther and the Scriptures**, by Johann Michael Reu, (1869-1943), a German-born American Lutheran pastor, theologian and educator who taught from 1899 till his death at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa.

As Luther speaks to us of the clarity, simplicity, trustworthiness and infallibility of Scripture, it is our hope and prayer that each member, household and congregation will turn daily to the Biblical readings with renewed desire for the Word which is a "lamp to [our] feet and a light to [our] path" (Ps. 119:105).

Copies of the 2018 Calendar and the selected readings from **Luther and the Scriptures** are available in the Narthex or online at www.thenalc.org. *If taking a copy from the Narthex, be sure to pick up **BOTH** parts.*

NEW BOARD MEMBERS for 2018 will be installed on Sunday, January 7th, during the Worship Service. They will have their regular Board Meeting on Sunday, January 14th, at 4:00 PM. On Saturday, January 27th, they will meet in Retreat at the Catholic Conference Center from 7:30 AM to 5:00 PM. Lift them up in prayer as they begin their work together as the Leadership Ministry Board.

YEAR END REPORTS are due January 15th, 2018. If you were in charge of a Ministry Team, event, Board Officer, or other functions of Grace Church, please submit a report of the 2017 activities to the Church Office so they can be included in the Annual Report. That report will be distributed early in February.

SPECIAL THANKS to all that helped make this a wonderful Advent and Christmas season. To:

Pastor & Karen Gilbert, Joy Heavner, Doug & Jackie Jarrett, Jodi & Lauren Martin, and Dan & Tricia Panek for spreading some smiles and treats to some of our Senior Members. Their Christmas Carol visits were most appreciated.

The Chancel Choir, Pastor Gilbert, and those that attended the Union Church Christmas worship service. This particular service is one that reminds us of those Saints that originally founded Grace, and those later that held services in the Union Church. Just as the day turns to dusk, candles are lit and held high to the hymn "Silent Night". Light spill out the windows of the old church onto the cemetery grounds. The acoustics are wonderful in this old church, and no microphones are needed.

All who made the Christmas Program a success. The costumes furnished by Thrivent were a big hit. Some new Christmas music was enjoyed by all, and of course the appearance of "Martin Luther" was welcomed and very meaningful. The cast consisting of Riley, Cooper, Sara, McKenzie, Makayla, Allison, Mattie, Meredith, Lauren, Jackson, Matthew, Katie, Michael, Karlee, and Alan along with helpers, Jackie, Jodi, Jill, Shelly, and Sharon all made the program a delight for all to watch. There was a great attendance for this event and all enjoyed the pizza and cake for the Baby Jesus birthday celebration.



TRIP TO GERMANY AND OBERAMMERGAU IS BEING PLANNED

Do you know about the Oberammergau Passion Play? The little village of Oberammergau, Germany was gripped by war, poverty and the Black Plague. The plague was sweeping across Europe killing thousands of people. The people of this small village prayed to God that he if would spare them, they would tell the gospel story put on a 'passion play' every ten years...

That was back in 1633. They survived, and performed the first Oberammergau Passion Play in 1634. Ever since, their descendants have carried out that pledge. For the past four centuries the tradition has continued, every ten years. Only villagers have been allowed to take part. And that is what will happen yet again in 2020, from May until October.

They devote a year of their lives to re-enacting the life, death and resurrection of Christ. All performers are laymen and pursue their usual careers as wood carvers, house wives and so forth...In real life for instance Jesus is a psychologist and Mary Magdalene works as a flight attendant. By taking on their roles in the Passion Play, they are fulfilling the promise to God made by their ancestors, celebrating their faith and sharing it with the world... **...as Oberammergauers have for some 375 years.**

The first performance is on May 16, 2020 and the final one on October 4, 2020. The play starts early to mid afternoon and, following an interval and included dinner, ends at around 10:30 P.M. The tours we offer include an official one to two-night Oberammergau Package depending on the tour selected. The tours include:

- 1 or 2-night stay in the Ammergau Alps (3-star hotel or 4-star guest house/pension)
- Breakfast each morning
- 3 course dinner on the night of arrival
- Lunch in Oberammergau before the performance
- **Category 1 or 2 theatre seats****
- Play text book in English
- 3 course dinner in Oberammergau during the play interval
- Shuttle bus services in Oberammergau and nearby villages

If you are interested, please call the Church Office or speak with Pastor Gil. The Passion Play always sells out months before the play begins. So get your name on the list now. We will also tour the sights of Germany in the footsteps of Martin Luther.

CONGRATULATIONS TO MICHAEL AND WANDA HALL on the birth of their son, Hagan Gabriel Hall. Hagan was born December 22, 2017 weighing 5 pounds 12 ounces and was 18 ¼ inches long. Makayla is his proud sister and James Hall is the proud grandfather. We pray God's blessings on this new life.

THOSE THAT SPONSOR THE FIRST SUNDAY BREAKFAST and Second Sunday Lunch have the right to name the recipient of the funds given at the meal. The funds can be used to reimburse those providing the meal, for a particular outreach project/mission, or both. You are asked to decide ahead of time where you wish the funds to be used and give that information to the Church Office so it can be published in the monthly newsletter and weekly bulletin. You are also asked to submit the menu ahead of time so that can also be published.

SOME RESOLUTIONS TO THINK ABOUT FOR THE CHRISTMAS/EPIPHANY/NEW YEAR

1) Love is always personal.

When I think about my family and how much I love them, it keeps me grounded about how love must be translated in my life and in the church. God's love is personal, individual, and His Son made it sacrificial. God reaches for the one – one at a time. It's personal. We want to reach the many, and the passion behind that is good, but if we're not careful, we can lose the personal touch and then we've lost God's heart. In order for you to communicate God's love in an authentic way, you have to be deeply in touch with it yourself on an intimate level. That means you can't just understand love theologically, you have to experience it personally. What does that look like for you?

2) Love fuels and refreshes your soul.

Love cannot be experienced at high speed. Slowing down is required. A few years ago, God spoke plainly to me in a prayer time. I was in a mode of rushing, praying quick and blasting off for my day. He said, "It's OK if you leave now, but if you want more of me, I cannot be rushed." I've thought a lot about that moment and that truth translates to every close friendship and family relationship as well. Love simply can't be rushed, and when you take the time love requires, your soul is deeply fueled and refreshed. Peace increases and that low-grade anxiety diminishes. But I encourage you to slow down, at least long enough to get your tank refueled.

3) Love teaches you how to receive.

The majority of leaders I know are good at giving but not at receiving. At risk of sounding contradictory, it's difficult to give from the heart unless you can receive freely at a heart level. For most kids, they quickly learn to receive love from their parents. Then as they mature, they can mirror that experience by giving love. As Christians, we first must receive God's love, before we truly have the ability to give God's love to others. I understand why you might have your guard up, but you must let it down to allow love in.

In this Christmas/Epiphany/New Year's season, soak in the love that others give you. It's part of God's greatest gift, it's the human expression of God's love.

LETTER FROM BISHOP BRADOSKY

December 2017

Dear faithful disciples of Jesus throughout the North American Lutheran Church, Grace, mercy and peace to you in the name of the One whose birth we celebrate!

With the birth of two additional grandchildren this year and while contemplating Mary's experience during our Advent preparation, I am reminded of Luther's words in one of his Christmas sermons:

Let us, then meditate upon the Nativity just as we see it happening in our own babies. I would not have you contemplate the deity of Christ, the majesty of Christ, but rather his flesh. Look upon the Baby Jesus. Divinity may terrify man. Inexpressible majesty will crush him. That is why Christ took on our humanity, save for sin, that he should not terrify us but rather that with love and favor he should console and confirm. Behold Christ lying in the lap of his young mother... What can be sweeter than the Babe, what more lovely than the mother... Look at the Child knowing nothing. Yet all that is belongs to him, that your conscience should not fear but take comfort in him....

The beginning of the Christmas Gospel reminds us of Mary's condition. She is pregnant, with child. What she has experienced since the first proclamation from the angel Gabriel was just as miraculous. The growth and development of a baby in the womb from just two tiny cells is a miracle. These cells continue to divide and multiply as the embryo attaches itself to the lining of the uterus. After five weeks, the embryo is the size of a grain of rice. It has a brain and spinal cord. After six weeks, the heart is beating and you can see the eyes, ears and head. After seven weeks, the arms, legs and nose are visible. After eight weeks, the baby is only two centimeters long but you can still see its fingers and toes. The perfect alignment and connection of every cell is a wondrous miracle. In the growth and development of every baby we are participants in God's gracious miracle of creation and new life.

Unlike any other mother, Mary is given the chance to participate in the birth of God's Only Son, the Savior of the World, Jesus Christ. On the other hand, just as in every other mother, the same things that unfold in the growth and development of every other baby are happening to Jesus inside of Mary. Through the joy and wonder, Mary is nonetheless confused, disturbed and filled with questions, yet she responds with faith-filled obedience. Luther comments that there were three miracles on Christmas: the Incarnation - God became a person, Mary remained a virgin and the greatest miracle of all was that Mary believed. She trusted God's promises and held fast to the words of God's messenger. Through such faith Mary is transformed and renewed, a new creation. Mary heard the proclamation that God wanted her to be in a relationship with Jesus. She was to play a part in His mission to save and redeem this world. This is the way faith begins in every person. We hear the message that Jesus wants to be in a relationship with us. He longs for us to respond like Mary: listening, believing and obeying.

In pregnancy, the changes for Mary or any woman come slowly, but the direction is set and her life will never again be the same. From deep within her body Mary began to make room for Jesus. So it is with faith. When we believe and respond obediently to the call of Jesus to be a part of His body, the Church, we begin to change and others begin to take notice.

As in pregnancy, so in faith, everything begins to change. Mary's life was transformed physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Viewing this miracle in my own wife, Kristi, four times and in our daughters, I am certain Mary's behaviors, habits and worldview also changed. She had new priorities. She was nurturing a new life inside her body. She was becoming a community, a family. The responsibility and accountability were inescapable and sometimes overwhelming. We live one way before our children are born and another way following their births. Faith in Jesus begins a similar process within us. He transforms every aspect of our lives, and through His word imparts a Kingdom of Heaven worldview. Our lives are changed forever.

Take time this Christmas to observe the intimate connection between a mother and her child. You will see a tender, nurturing relationship marked by sacrificial love. You will see the powerful priority of that relationship. Through faith, the Holy Spirit draws us into an intimate, loving relationship with Jesus. Jesus said that He wanted His disciples to be one with Him, as He was one with the Father. Faith draws us ever closer to Jesus. The relationship with Jesus comes before all others.

We prepare to receive children into our lives by first making a place for them in our hearts. We make a place for that new life in our relationships. Then we make a place for them in our homes: a bed, a crib, a nursery. We prepare by purchasing car seats, changing tables, high chairs, strollers, blankets, clothing, diapers, formula, diaper bags, toys. The list seems endless.

This preparation is a way to practice putting this new life ahead of our own. It is a way to practice the selfless love necessary to nurture a new life. Regardless of the cost, we give all we can. We want to give our children the best life possible.

Our faith starts by making a place for Jesus in our hearts. That's what Mary did when she heard the Good News. We are called to do the same. Jesus has a place in our relationships, a place in our homes. We support the mission of His Church with our offerings so that others will have the same opportunity. It is our way of practicing selfless love, putting Christ ahead of self, an expression of our love for Him.

The Christmas Gospel announces His birth. The pain and struggle of labor produce the delight and fulfillment of new life, a baby. What was invisible is now seen. What was untouchable now reaches out to hold our finger in His little hand. Those same hands created the entire world and sustain everything in it.

With a new life in our hands, more work and responsibility follow: sleepless night, feedings every two hours, changing diapers, burping, comforting, rocking, bouncing, listening to their sounds, observing their smiles and grimaces, watching them grow and change by the minute. Life becomes more complicated, not less. The cost increases until it seems as though we have given everything. So too, in following Jesus we take up our cross in response to His ultimate expression of selfless love, giving His life on a cross for our redemption and salvation.

This new relationship is not something we are meant to engage in alone. We were designed to be in community, and our children were created to be in a family. In our relationship with Christ we need His community, the Church. As our children are baptized we express that same truth. It is only in His community that we continue to grow and mature spiritually, through Word and Sacrament. In community, we live life in Christ as His disciples. We learn how to share this faith in Jesus with others and nurture them in the faith. We become disciples, equipping others to become disciple makers. Through the same Holy Spirit, we are participants in the spiritual rebirth of others who come to know and follow this One born in Bethlehem.

The world tells us that our purpose is to make our life easy and carefree. Jesus says we are called to a relationship of faith in Him that is lived out in our vocation and through loving relationships marked by mutual responsibility and accountability. That is the fruit of love. When there is less time for me there is more time for life, for loving others.

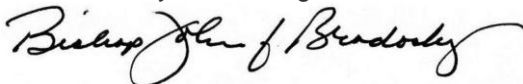
This Christmas we move with Mary from pregnancy to delivery, from making room for Him to embracing Him. We move from the hope of promises proclaimed into the reality of an obedient faith. While we have made room for Jesus in our hearts, homes and relationships, Christmas reminds us that the greater reality is that He came to proclaim a far greater truth, that He has created a place in His heart for every one of us.

Those who follow Jesus not only become a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, but the Kingdom of Heaven becomes a part of them. They not only enter the Kingdom but the Kingdom enters them. The life we live is the message we proclaim.

May He who made Himself manifest in the world be manifest in our lives.

Christ is Born! O Come, Let us Adore Him!

With you following Him, this Christmas and forever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Bishop John F. Bradosky". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bishop John F. Bradosky

This is based on those that served in 2017, and in some cases for many years prior.

**PLEASE
CONFIRM
WITH
THE
CHURCH
OFFICE
IF YOU
WILL OR
WILL
NOT
PREPARE
THE
MEAL IN
2018**

	FIRST SUNDAY BREAKFAST	
January	Frankie Crouse, Doug & Jackie Jarrett, Martha Johnson, Scott & Carolyn Whisnant	Confirmed
February	Harvey & Helen Leatherman & Family, Dan & Tricia Panek	
March	Jo Doris Frye Family	
April	Easter Breakfast 4/1/18 - Dennis & Nancy Leonard & Family	
May	Via de Cristo Ministry	Confirmed
June	No Breakfast Served	----
July	No Breakfast Served	----
August	No Breakfast Served	----
September	No Breakfast Served	----
October	Lorene Heavner, Gary Leatherman, Dan & Tricia Panek	
November	Pastor Gil & Karen, Joy Heavner, Don & Nicky Jarrett, Mike & Debi Pisko	
December	Herb Travis' Learning Hour Class	Confirmed

	SECOND SUNDAY LUNCH	
January	Leadership Board Ministry Team	Confirmed
February	Christian Education/Learning Ministry Team	Confirmed
March	Chancel Choir	
April	Christian Education/Learning Ministry Team	Confirmed
May	Mr. Bivens' Learning Hour Class	Confirmed
June	No Lunch Served	----
July	No Lunch Served	----
August	No Lunch Served	----
September	Rally Day	covered dish
October	Via de Cristo Ministry	Confirmed
November	Chancel Choir	
December	Christian Education/Learning Ministry Team	

THE TWELVE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

(Reprinted from Crisis Magazine on Religion and Christian Life)

Eight octave days, following Christmas. Twelve days before Epiphany. Forty days until the Presentation. This is how we count the days of Christmas. The octave and forty days are biblical, prescribed by the Mosaic Law for Circumcision and the dedication in the Temple of a male who opens his mother's womb. Through these days, we mark the life of Christ and the mysteries of our salvation. But there is also a mystical element leading to the Epiphany with the miraculous manifestation of Christ's identity—the breaking forth of a new, divine reality into the world.

The twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany are not biblical, but reflect the ancient connection between the great feasts. Epiphany and Christmas arose together (at least in the East), commemorating the coming of Christ into the world. Epiphany does not just happen to follow on the heels of Christmas, but completes it: Christ enters into the world and is then manifested to it. The shepherds are the first to receive the Good News of the coming of the Messiah at his birth, followed by the wise men.

The wise men symbolize the manifestation of Christ to the nations. The twelve days preceding may represent the fulness of the people of God. The feast celebrates the manifestation of Christ in the worship of the wise men, Christ's Baptism, and the Wedding of Cana, though we tend to focus only on the first of these three mysteries in the West. We focus on the wise men due to the proximity of the feasts, though the feast of the Baptism of Christ follows the next Sunday and the Wedding of Cana on the following (through the Gospel reading).

We tend to count Christmas backwards today, celebrating it in advance. We sing Christmas carols and hymns during Advent and even prior to Advent. We need to die to ourselves to embrace the new life offered to us in the liturgy. We then extend our celebration in time, prolonging it throughout a season. Santa Claus and the shopping season has so overshadowed our celebration that we end Christmas the day after. We've lost sight of the tradition of Twelfth Night on the evening of January 5, a time of public ceremony.

'Twas the night before Epiphany and all through the house... a great holiday ensued! Although by January 5, these days we've mostly forgotten about Christmas, in the old days the celebration culminated on this night. Christmas was marked by the Eve Candlelight Worship and family meals, but Twelfth Night by more public events and social gatherings. Twelfth Night celebrations were marked by:

- A Twelfth Night cake, also called a king's cake or bean cake (elaborate by Victorian times, but more like a pancake or waffle in earlier times)
- A crowning of a king (and later a queen as well), who leads the king's drink or toast, sometimes with a court of fools
- A feast that includes eating the edible arrangements of the Christmas decorations
- Theatre, music, dancing, caroling
- A toast for good health, called the wassail in England

The cake helped determine the king, with a bean or coin inside. The king represented not the wise men, but Herod. This led to the king sometimes referred to as the king of fools (and a previous tradition picked "fools" to be king), with a jester and other in costume accompanying him as his court on parade. This led to dressing up and hiding one's identity (marking the beginning of Carnival), as well as playing practical jokes.

The king presided over the feast with a ceremonial first drink. The evening as a whole provided an occasion for dancing, plays, and the drinking of the Christmas wassail. "Was hail," meaning be of good health, became a toast for the Twelfth Night, with a drink made of spiced ale or cider. The occasion led to caroling and an opportunity to exchange gifts, imitating the wise men.

Protestants continued the Twelfth Night celebrations in Holland, England, Germany and the United States. George Washington was known for hosting elaborate gatherings to mark the day, serving Martha's Great Cake.

Another Dutchman, Jan Steen, was the most prolific of all the painters of the Twelfth Night scene, with at least six takes on the theme. The painting below gives you a sense of the role of music, both in the celebration and also from the carolers outside the door, carrying a paper star to honor the wise men. The scene differs as it is in a home, versus a tavern, and those attending are not peasants, as you see from their dress and the furnishings of the house. You also see a child serving as the king (second best after a "fool"), leading the toast while offered a waffle. A child in the bottom left raises her skirt to jump over three candles marking the three kings. The king also has a fool in his court, replete with costume. Eggshells litter the floor, used to make the waffles.

We memorialize the twelve days of Christmas in song, but, beyond that one isolated piece, do we mark the twelve days? Epiphany culminates Christmas, without completely ending the celebration. As we count the days of Christmas, we can reorder our Christian calendar more broadly: First of all, we should imitate our ancestors and celebrate more heartily on the days following Christmas. Like them, let's leave Advent for prayer and penance so that we can prepare to celebrate when the time comes.

Second, Santa has a day of his own and it's not Christmas. Let's give him the spotlight when he deserves it on December 5, the feast of St. Nick. It's the feast day of children (when boys used to dress up as bishops) and a great day to receive a present in a shoe.

Third, if we follow point two, then Jesus can have our undivided attention on December 25. The crèche constitutes our focal point, guiding us to adore the newborn Christ with the shepherds. Our celebration takes on a domestic and familial character around the family table. On the last day of the octave, the calendar itself embraces the new king's birth. Let's pray for the peace he brings that day.

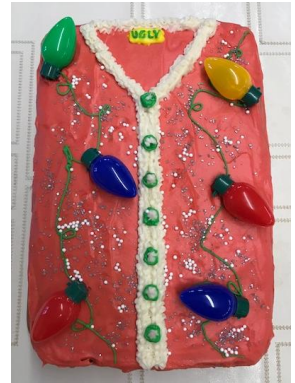
Fourth, then let's party heartily on January 5, rediscovering the Twelfth Night. It's the time of the wise men, more communal celebrating with friends, gifts, drink, and song. How about some wassail? Some countries still give gifts mainly on the Epiphany. In the Middle Ages it was a day to give presents beyond the family circle. If Santa returns to his own day, we could emphasize presents more when Jesus received them. It is also a good day to give a gift to Jesus along with the wise men.

Fifth, we should continue celebrating the broader Christmas and Epiphany "season," which doesn't end until the Presentation on February 2. In particular, we should keep Christmas songs going as they're ditched by the radio stations and even our churches.

Finally, a main suggestion: *move Christmas parties from Advent to the Twelfth Night!* Since we usually don't see our friends and coworkers on Christmas day we tend to celebrate with them a week or two before the holyday. As Christians (and Lutherans) we should set a new (old) trend of hosting parties on the Twelfth Night. I think it could really catch on and help us to count the days of Christmas again.

THANK YOU to those that remembered me with Christmas cards, gifts, and well wishes. I truly appreciate your thoughtfulness. May God bless you with a very blessed 2018. - Kathy Hefner

THE FIRST ANNUAL COOKIE EXCHANGE and Ugly Sweater party was a blast! Grace definitely has a lot of creative women and excellent bakers. The ugliest sweater contest winner was Bobbie Brendle. The cookie exchange contest winners were Jill Matthews, Geraldine Jarrett, and Martha Johnson. Thank you all who participated and brought canned goods for ECCCM. Based on feedback from attendees, we will definitely have a Second Cookie Exchange and Ugly Sweater party next year!



the Winner is



Grace Notes

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