

THE SPIRE

ADVENT 2023



A publication of
WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

The Sound of Hope

We've been singing a sad song
for quite some time,
the melody syncing with our heartbeats,
the lyrics stamped to the front of our minds.
You say, sad songs are honest.
It's hard to disagree,
for sad songs tap us on the shoulder.
Sad songs remind us
of the 100 different corners
heartbreak could be behind.
But I don't have it in me
to sing a sad song forever.
So despite the news,
despite the aches in my body,
despite the phone call last night
that says she's waiting for the test results,
despite yesterday's shooting,
despite the unknown and unchanged,
I am going to sing a song of hope.
Like a canary in a snowstorm,
I don't need another song of what is;
I need a song of what could be.
So sing with me.
Our voices may get drowned out by the wind,
but surely someone will ask:
Was that a flash of yellow in the snow?
Was that the sound of hope?

-Rev. Sarah Speed

Read the *Spire* online at:
westminster-church.org/news-&-media/the-spire-online

The *Spire* is published seasonally by the church staff from September through June. Contributions can be made by emailing a Word document to *Spire* editor Sara Kyle at sara@ruhlekyle.org. Please include the author's name, telephone number, email address, and a title. All articles are subject to editing.

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Cover artwork:
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From the Office of **JO FORREST**

Senior Pastor & Head of Staff



Dr. Jo Forrest

The Advent rituals of decorating, cookie baking, card writing, and Christmas planning usually lift my spirits. To bless an early nightfall, I'd light a candle and turn up the tunes. This year, that all seems frivolous.

The horrific wars that are fought on foreign shores weigh on my heart. Our elected leaders seem to draw lines in the sand rather than try to draw us together. We bicker over the economy. Too many kids still go hungry.

Some of you share these laments and some of you are just weary of laments.

When it feels as though closing the door to the world might make my heart safe is when I need to hear the stories of God of coming to people long ago.

Zechariah and Elizabeth, too aged to matter, bear John the Baptist. Mary, insignificant by all appearances, says "yes."

They create a home for the Christ Child. Their lives tell a story of weariness turning to joy that is possible for us today.

Because of Jesus' birth, no matter how ugly this world might seem, when we baptize babies in his name their faces light up with joy. Parents and grandparents too. It's not the frilly dress. We all know that as we raise children in the church, they will carry this sacred story.

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, when we lay to rest our loved ones, we trust him to welcome them home. In deep sorrow, God promises this joy.

If you're feeling a bit weary, come sit by me and the others at Westminster. We've stories to share. Songs to sing. Joy to experience. ■

Comfort, O Comfort
By Lauren Wright Pittman
Digital painting

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JOY!

MY ENCOUNTER WITH

By Becky Boyer
Director of Youth Ministry

I am always asking the youth to look out for where God is working in their everyday lives. For example, where do they see people being kind to one another and being Jesus' hands or feet to someone. It is my hope that it will open their eyes to the world around them and help them think about how the Holy Spirit is moving every day.

A couple of weeks ago I was heading back to my house after walking my dog and I saw a man standing in front of my house. He was looking at the sign in my yard that has a picture of Mr. Rogers and the words "Love Your Neighbor." When he turned to look at me, I could see that he was no ordinary neighbor because he was wearing a bright red clown nose! I have seen this man in the past around Mt. Lebanon and always wondered what his story was. As I said "I have always wanted to meet you" and he smiled, I knew right away this man was full of joy. He told me he loved the sign, and he began telling me how we are called to love our neighbor because that is what Jesus taught us in the Scriptures. I was floored! He could quote scripture better than many seminarians I knew. I asked him about the red clown nose, and he referred to Patch Adams and how he just wanted to make people smile and laugh. When I asked how he knew so much scripture he said that he almost became a priest in his younger days but became disillusioned with institutional religion. He told me that he connects with God by praying and meditating every day.



Here are some quotes from our conversation:

"We should all be praying, blessing, and forgiving one another."

"People are so caught up. They believe man instead of God. I always knew that God is with me because he said I will never leave you or forsake you. That's how I know that all through my life he showed me that he was always with me."

"That's my life! It should be everybody's life! To love your neighbor as you love yourself. When you love God that comes automatically. You do love your neighbor as you love yourself. I grew up doing errands for my neighbors, saying nice words, anything that will build each other up. Because that's what we are here for - to build each other up."

At Veritas that evening, I told the youth my story and showed pictures and some video I took of our meeting that morning. I never imagined encountering God on the sidewalk in front of my house, but I sure felt the Holy Spirit in my neighborhood that day! ■

Mary, Blessed and Bold

By Sara Kyle

Sara is the editor of the Spire and organizer of the Westminster Seminars

As we turn our focus to the coming - advent - of Christ, an encouraging starting point is Mary's joyful and yet humble song in response to the news that she will bear the Christ Child. Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46-55) is known as the Magnificat, after the opening phrase: "My soul magnifies the Lord." Magnify in the biblical context means to "praise or render honor to God." And indeed, Mary honors the greatness and mercy of God. She also embraces her new responsibilities as the Lord's faithful servant who will by God's grace be forever called blessed. Young Mary's words are far from meek. They are confident, surprising, even brave.

Scholar Daniel Migliore notes that Mary astounds us twice, "first by her free and glad consent to God's electing grace," and second "by her bold and passionate expression of God's solidarity with the poor and downtrodden of the earth." With courage, Mary proclaims God's judgment on injustice, which will turn the order of the world upside down: "He has brought down the powerful...and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." That's powerful language. As one of the poor, Mary declares her faith in God's abiding concern for the poor and the broken of the world. In that way alone, she is a model of discipleship for us all. ■



The Magnificat

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

-Luke 1:46-55 NRSV

How Does a Weary World Rejoice logo:
"Two people—one radiating joy and the other wading into weariness—hold the world together."



WEARY BUT JOYFUL

The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you - wonderful, joyous news for all people."

-Luke 2:10

By Ed Sutter
Senior Director of Christian Education

"How does a weary world rejoice?" It truly is a fantastic question, isn't it? It strikes me as particularly poignant because we so rarely (if ever) equate the two feelings. Weary but joyful. Worn out but jubilant. Bedraggled but delighted. The ideas seem to oppose one another. So, how does a weary world rejoice?

Well, if we remain stuck in semantics, we may never get there. But, if we turn our minds to what we know of human experience we might notice something deeply resonant: the sincerest joys often come in the midst of the greatest weariness. Consider these three scenarios that might help illuminate the experience.

First, consider the images that you've seen online or in textbooks that portray VE Day (Victory in Europe) at the close of World War II. Not a single person in those pictures would have been a stranger to loss, pain, or grief; and yet they are incalculably jubilant.

Next, consider an athlete as victory is declared, or someone who crosses the finish line of their very first race. Sweaty, dirty, battered, sore, but arms raised and often with tears in their eyes. "They left it all on the field," we say - but now they experience life with renewed strength from a heart full of celebration.

Finally, turn your mind to the women who have ushered life in the act of childbirth. It's likely the case that I've not witnessed a more toilsome endeavor. Spanning months of sacrifice and adaptation culminating in an apex of fatigue and strain, weary does not begin to scratch the surface. But, oh the joy when mother and child behold one another face to face.

Mary must have known this, and it would seem that the shepherds had their own similar experience. Our Scriptures tell us that "they were terrified" at the arrival of the Lord's angel (and rightly so). How quickly their terror turns to praise! From the most weary of worlds, the greatest praise does rise.

Has your heart become weary? Have the myriad worries of the day worn you down? There is already a victory. Christ has crossed the finish line. And in this season, we remember that a child has been born and beholds his Creation face to face. There is much about which we can rejoice, my friends.

God is good, Christ is Lord, the Spirit dwells within us. And don't you forget it. ■

WESTMINSTER at Westminster

Westminster Women Find Joy in Study and Fellowship

By Kristy Berrott
Elder

When I was first told about the *Spire's* theme for Advent, I immediately knew that I could connect. I had been feeling weary with the world as it was, and I was looking for a way to overcome this feeling. My daily interactions were leaving me with less and less hope for humanity. Therefore, when the Adult Spiritual Development Commission was looking for people to run some new groups this past summer, I decided to take a risk and become a facilitator for a group of women with a book study of the title *Hope: A User's Manual* by MaryAnn McKibben Dana. Since then, our group has continued to tackle another title, *Universal Christ* by Richard Rohr.

As we meet each week, I find myself rejoicing as my faith is nurtured by a supportive and hilarious group of women. Through our discussions, we laugh, we question, we cry, and we grow in our faith. It is a safe and comfortable space to challenge our interpretations of each text while also encouraging one another with their daily applications. Through the success of Ladies' Night at Westminster, the group has decided to continue our meetings into the future.

Please know that we would love to have you join us. Just as I have been gifted with this group, I wish nothing more than for each group member to develop a real sense of female fellowship at Westminster Church. Please look for further details to be shared after our women's retreat on November 10. We hope to see you at our next Ladies' Night. ■



A Tribute to My Friend

By Laura Ecklin
Youth Ministry and
Administrative Manager



Ed and Laura at the Alive Music Festival in 2009

Ed preaching at Worship in the Park

“**W**hat is the most important thing I need to know about you?” The question Ed Sutter asks every new student who walks up the ramp entering the youth wing. You can imagine that question gets a variety of answers from middle and high school kids. They talk about the sports they play, their favorite school subject, pets, video games, a special talent. Ed will listen intently to whatever your answer is. He will wait, eyes wide, while you think about your answer if you need some time.

In the last 17 years, Ed Sutter has served this congregation in immeasurable ways. Beginning as a fresh college graduate, his main constants were his guitar, a dodgeball, and his dedication to Christ. Ed’s responsibilities and job titles grew with him throughout his time at Westminster. In fact, when he started working here I was in seventh grade – just beginning my time in youth ministry. And now as he leaves us, he has been my direct supervisor for the last several years.

We have been asked as a staff to consider the “holes” his absence will create as a practical measure to ensure the operations of the church are not disrupted. I have a sticky note on my desk to jot things down as I think of them. Unfortunately, there is not a sticky note big enough to capture all of the times Ed made a significant impact on me and every person he interacted with in his time at Westminster. He has shared his ideas during the week, spent time with teenagers and adults in prayer, through hard moments and celebrations. He speaks the word of God on Sundays through the pulpit and through song.

So what is next for Westminster with this big hole? So many people have asked me this in passing, so I felt it important to share my thoughts here. In Matthew 6, Jesus reminds us the birds will be fed and the lilies will grow. We should not worry about these things, for our heavenly Father knows they are needed. In the same way, I put my faith in the Holy Spirit to guide our congregation through all transitions. God will guide us and our leadership. His plan and timing are perfect.

Best wishes, dear friend. To say you will be missed does not begin to capture the impression you’ve made under that big white steeple. ■



Learning from the Kindness of Children

By Denise Burke
WECEP Executive Director



Children teach us so many things that we never realized we needed to know. Not that long ago, I witnessed a precious moment among three little boys on the WECEP playground. The three boys pictured in the photo worked up a great thirst while running after each other during a fun game of what I would call tag. They all paused from their fun to run over to the water fountain for a drink. After the first boy finished his drink, the smallest in the bunch was next in line. He looked up at the fountain, and then with his big, brown, sad eyes he looked to his friends. I heard discussion between the boys and next I saw the teamwork that melted my heart. One of the boys turned the fountain on while the other lifted the small boy so that he too could enjoy a drink. I was lucky enough to witness this act of kindness and even capture a picture of this beautiful moment.

As I drove home that afternoon, I pondered whether to keep that peaceful moment in mind until tomorrow or to turn on the news when I got home to hear about all of the troubles that so many are currently facing. I decided that the moment I witnessed on the playground was something I needed to hold on to for as long as I could. So, my television stayed off that night, and I cherished the beautiful act of kindness I had witnessed from three year old boys on the playground. I began to really think about how wonderful the world would be if more adults would emulate the kindness that children have, and lift each other up instead of creating unnecessary chaos in this world that we share.

The loving staff and I are grateful that we have the opportunity to teach so many children how to be kind, help one another, and most important, live like Jesus. Together at WECEP we pray for this weary world and look forward to the season of Advent. ■



The Advent season will soon be upon us. In the church this season is dedicated to the hopeful arrival of Jesus the Christ. Yet in this season of hope, there often is a spiritual weariness. Every day we are overwhelmed by stories about our world, our nation, and our communities that contribute to spiritual weariness. Each of us can compile our own list of situations and events that prompt that sense of weariness.

In the Talmud it is written, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

God's work is never done.

Recently, after each of the worship services, town hall meetings were conducted to describe how our gifts to Westminster support our ministry. Even though we look forward to 2024, there remain opportunities in 2023 for Westminster to do more.

Any additional revenue received will enable our church to turn hope into action.

Please consider an additional gift before year's end. For folks over 72 years of age, certain types of individual retirement plans require a minimum distribution by the IRS. Some portions of these distributions can be donated without tax liability to the church.

For those of you still working, perhaps you have the good fortune of receiving a bonus or incentive, a portion of which you would wish to give to the church. Or, perhaps, you have been blessed in another way that you wish to give to your church.

Your gift, no matter the size, expresses hope in a world that needs it. ■

By Dave Davis, Sr.
Member, Stewardship Commission

Year End Giving



A THRILL OF HOPE

"A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices." The Christmas season, and especially Christmas Eve, just isn't complete without the beloved carol "O Holy Night." Jesus' birth brought a thrill of hope to a weary world, one that "lay in sin and darkness." The birth of Jesus brought about a "new and glorious" day. And that's certainly worth celebrating!

A friend recently sent me this:

Have you heard about glimmers?

They are the opposite of triggers. A glimmer is a tiny micro-moment of happiness, a sign of hope. Once you begin to look for them, they will start to appear everywhere.

By **Christine Hestwood**
Music Director

Let's look for glimmers this season. I experienced one the other day while leaving Sunrise Senior Living, where my Dad is currently living. I find myself in tears or close to tears every time I leave there. I was particularly low one recent afternoon and feeling very weary. And then the bells of Westminster began to ring at six o'clock. I looked at the steeple and rejoiced. Thank you, God, for that glimmer!

Music, to me, is a glimmer. If you find yourself needing a glimmer this season, consider listening to one of my favorite Christmas songs, "O Magnum Mysterium" by Morten Lauridsen. "Its luminous, gently shifting harmonies perfectly express a timeless sense of serenity and wonder."

O magnum mysterium, et admirabile sacramentum, ut animalia viderent Dominum natum, Jacentem in praesepio! Beata Virgo, cujus viscera meruerunt portare Dominum, Christum. Alleluia!

O great mystery, and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the newborn Lord, lying in a manger! Blessed is the virgin whose womb was worthy to bear the Lord, Jesus Christ. Alleluia!

My wish is that all of us will continue to rejoice when we feel weary and look for the glimmers around us! ■



Grief, lament, and sorrow are unavoidable aspects of the human experience. But we know that our God is walking alongside us, ready to listen to all we have to say. Practicing lament as a family helps children and adults process difficult times and situations. Use the following questions to guide your family in lamenting:

1. What are the things that threaten the health and well-being of our family/friends/selves? What things are you afraid will hurt you/our family/friends?
2. What stories about God's actions in the past relate to these concerns? Can you think of any stories from the Bible in which God dealt with a problem like this?
3. How did God deal with the threat or problem in these stories? What did God do to fix the problem?
4. What do you want God to do about these threats or problems? Let's imagine how God could fix this.
5. How can we be a part of God's solution? What would God want us to do to help?
6. Write a prayer together based on your answers to these questions.
7. Revisit your conversation and prayer as many times as you need.

Practicing Lament as a Family

By **Faith Kemmler**
Director of Children's &
Family Ministry

Lamenting can be used for problems big or small. This biblical practice not only reminds us of God's presence in our lives but also that God cares, can handle all of our feelings, and wants to actively walk with us. Though it may be difficult to think about lamenting the world's problems, teaching our families this skill and practice will provide them with the tools they need to navigate life's struggles. ■



Loving as Jesus Loved

By Erik Wiesemann, *Light in My City*, Founder

It's that time of year. While many people are giddy with excitement for the holidays, there are those who are too weary to rejoice. Both groups can relate to weariness. Even the most optimistic get worn down by life.

When family and friends walk with us during trials and discouragement, it gives us a sense of hope. *Ultimate* hope, however, is found only through Jesus. Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." That's a promise.

But what of those who might know about – but not really *know* – Jesus? The question then and now remains: who, exactly, are our neighbors? To Jesus, our neighbors are everyone, regardless of proximity, stratum, religion, ethnicity – or our comfort level. The Good Samaritan is a perfect example.

Are the homeless our neighbors? Our Savior was homeless throughout his ministry. Matthew 8:20: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." How many of us would walk right past him were he with us in the world today?

As we celebrate our blessings this Thanksgiving, and celebrate the birth of Immanuel, let's do so with an outward focus. The joy and energy from serving as Jesus' hands and feet to love our neighbors as ourselves is the antidote to weariness. From the neighbor we know to the homeless person on the sidewalk, loving as Jesus loved is the ultimate celebration – any time of year. ■

By Rev. Ann Morris
Parish Associate

O holy night

"Sometimes in a weary world you have to sing yourself back into belief," says Sydney to Freddie in James Runcie's *The Road to Grantchester*. During the Christmas season the music and lyrics of "O Holy Night" are a sure tonic to strengthen a fragile faith. The history of the song is rife with controversy, legend, and popularity. It began in 1843 as a poem by Placide Cappeau written for a Christmas program at a church in a small French town. Soon Adolphe Adam, known for his secular operas, set it to music. Adam's composition includes high notes that challenge even professional singers. *American Magazine* reported that when the song was introduced in Canada, congregations waited with trepidation for the climactic phrases of the song to see whether notes would be sung sharp or flat. In France the song gained popularity and was often sung at the midnight Christmas Eve mass. However, because Roman Catholic Church criticism of the song focused on its militant tone and dubious theology of the original French lyrics, it was rarely included in Catholic hymnals.

We Americans are familiar with John Sullivan Dwight's 1855 translation into English. Dwight softened the lecturing and forceful tone of Cappeau's French lyrics and added the third verse which includes "Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother," thus adding a specific social justice message to the season's theme of peace. The musical composition still carries the rousing canter of Adam's original tempo, something that was anathema to mid-19th century liturgical music.

Listen to "The Definitive Top Ten Renditions of 'O Holy Night'" chosen by Joseph Peterson listed in his 2014 Huffington Post blog. All follow Dwight's English lyrics, but each soloist follows her or his own heart to express "the thrill of hope" of the Christmas season. These ten are a sample of R&B, country, and close to operatic style. For its freshness with simplicity of voice and arrangement, my favorite is Sufjan Stevens. Who is yours? ■

O Holy night! The stars are brightly shining
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
'Til He appeared, and the soul felt its worth

A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn'

Fall on your knees
O hear the angel voices
O night divine

O night when Christ was born
O night divine
O night, O night divine

Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother
And in His name, all oppression shall cease
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we
With all within let's praise His holy name

Christ is the Lord!
His name forever praise we
Noel, Noel

O night, O night divine
Noel, Noel
O night, O holy night

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WATERCOURSES



by Hannah Garrity

Inspired by *Psalm 126*
Oil paint, charcoal, and
copper leaf on canvas

This painting is a meditation on the holy watercourses of the Negeb and all of the metaphors within that image. I painted with oil paint, charcoal, and copper leaf on canvas; the copper represents joy in our weary world.

For God, we are weary and we see no end to the weariness. Lament with us. Holy One, you are steadfast in your love like the watercourses of the Negeb. In your name, we call out evil. When we do, we are glimmers of hope. By your example, we act in the ways of Jesus. When we do, we are shimmers of joy. We often fall short; forgive us. We strive on, for when we succeed, your new heaven shines through. Strive with us.

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SAVE *the* DATES

Family Gingerbread Night

Wednesday, December 6 | 6:00 p.m.

Annual Christmas Concert

Sunday, December 10 | 7:00 p.m.

A Quiet Christmas

Wednesday, December 13 | 6:30 p.m.

Breakfast at the Manger

Saturday, December 16 | 9:00 a.m.

Sunday, December 24

Advent Morning Worship Service
10:00 a.m.

Christmas Eve Worship Services

Family Service | 5:00 p.m.
Contemporary Service | 7:00 p.m.
Lessons and Carols | 9:00 p.m.

New Year's Eve Day

Sunday, December 31
One worship service | 10:00 a.m.