“Comfort, comfort now my people, tell of peace,’ thus says our God.

‘Comfort those who sit in sorrow, mourning under sorrow’s load.’”

The words to this 17th century Advent hymn, from the poetry of the prophet Isaiah, sound especially apt this year. As we look ahead to Advent and Christmas at Westminster, the impact of Covid colors the season. The hymns and carols we have intoned in past years take on a certain poignancy.

“O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.”

The people long ago, waiting in darkness for the coming of a great light, knew the discipline of patience. Over long generations their faith in a promised Messiah sustained them through the night. Now we trust the same hope will carry us across the threshold of hope.

One of the oldest carols in our hymnal, written in the 9th century, speaks of the unexpected nature of our waiting through these days.

“When this old world drew on toward night,
You came, but not in splendor bright.
Not as a monarch, but the child
Of Mary, blameless mother mild.”

The first reaction of the characters in the story of the birth of Jesus is fear. They are all afraid in Advent, as some of us may be this year. Will it be the same as always? Will the pandemic ruin the story? Can we safely gather with family and friends?

Advent and Christmas at Westminster this year will look and sound both familiar and new. While we will not be gathering in person to deck the halls and light the Advent candles and sing the carols, all of that will happen.

In Sunday sermons this season we will acknowledge our Advent anxieties, and explore how the characters in the story long ago handled their own fear. Their hope carried them through.

“My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.”
Make a Difference with Giving
by Mary Hess, Director of Stewardship

In this extraordinary year, many of us are having new conversations about money. Between layoffs, new work routines, an erratic stock market, myriad uncertainties, and for some, even difficulty feeding our families the meaning of money comes into clearer focus. Many of us are learning to trust God in new ways, and if we have resources, to use them more thoughtfully. Scripture captures what many are experiencing: “Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves” (Proverbs 11:28).

Supporting God’s work through Westminster is a wonderful way to make a difference in the world! And this year, due to the pandemic, there are new provisions from the CARES Act of March 2020 that may help (see article below). As you consider year-end giving, here are a few options: 1) Checks, or online contributions (westminstermpls.org/ways-to-give) are easy and may be eligible for a federal tax deduction, 2) Appreciated stock gifts can also be appealing because long-term gains are not taxed, and the gift is generally deductible from income tax, 3) IRA giving: If you’re over 70 ½, you may make a gift from your IRA without having to pay income tax on the gift. The mandate to take a required minimum distribution has been waived for 2020 but you may still do so; contact your plan administrator to make a gift. 4) Legacy Gifts, such as a bequest in your will, support Westminster for future generations, 5) a no-longer needed life insurance policy can be donated, and may be eligible for a tax deduction.

NOTE: Please consult with your tax or financial adviser before you act. Contact Kelsey Noack, Interim Accounting Manager, (knoack@wpc-mpls.org), if you would like to make arrangements with Westminster. Thank you!

Embodying the Beloved Community
by Cathie Fischer, Westminster member

“These words from Scripture embody for me the “Beloved Community”. As a member of the congregation, I hear those words preached, sung, and prayed every Sunday, as an Elder, I see them permeate the discernment process each month; as a member of the Racial Justice Task Force, I saw them lived out in our deliberations to further the work of racial justice throughout the programs of our church.

As individuals, we are offered many opportunities to study and act toward actualizing the Beloved Community. Working together, we nurture cherished relationships and follow Christ’s example. I find hope through our collective energy, hope in times of reflection, and hope in serving our world as the Holy Spirit moves.

For me, this hope provides the foundation for each day, trusting that “the Will of God will never take me where the Grace of God cannot protect me.” Do join me in this hope by sharing your time, talent, and treasure by whatever means you are able. In this time of COVID-19, it is more important than ever. Thanks be to God.

The CARES Act and Provisions Impacting Charitable Giving*

The CARES ACT (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act) was signed into law on March 27, 2020. The act seeks to alleviate economic hardship that has resulted from the coronavirus pandemic. Some key provisions regarding giving in the year 2020 that might help in your charitable giving are:

Higher Deduction Limits: Individuals can deduct cash contributions made to qualified charitable organizations of up to 100% of their adjusted gross income (AGI). In 2021, the limit for deducting cash contributions will return to 60% of the taxpayer’s AGI.

New $300 Charitable Deduction for Non-Itemizers: The CARES Act enables taxpayers who take the standard deduction to claim an above-the-line tax deduction for a total of $300 in qualified cash donations on their tax return.

Required Minimum Distributions Suspended: The CARES Act temporarily waives the mandate for those who are normally required to take their Required Minimum Distributions (RMDs). This applies to all types of retirement plans (including IRAs, 401(k)s, 403(b)s, 457(b)s, and inherited IRA plans.

*Information from the Presbyterian Foundation
Dear friends,

In a Zoom new member class in mid-November a fully decorated Christmas tree sat in the background of a couple’s home. “The world needs more joy right now, so we’re starting early,” they said.

What does a Covid Christmas look like? Joy, in spite of it all.

You may read in this News about ways Westminster will mark Advent and Christmas this year. Our staff and lay leaders have worked creatively to make this a season as memorable as every other year.

Christians throughout history have often had to mark their high holy days in the midst of crisis. Think of those in congregations across the globe during the flu pandemic of 1918. More than a third of the world’s population was infected; Christians marked two Christmases before it subsided. Imagine how hard it was to celebrate the season in Europe during the World Wars of the last century. Or think of Syrian Christians in their recent civil war, or Cameroonian Christians in the midst of violence in their land today, or Christians enclosed today in Bethlehem on the West Bank.

The point is, Christmas happens precisely because of the shape in which the world finds itself. God does not choose to come among us because all is well on earth. Israel’s ancient prophets understood the link between earthly crisis and heavenly intervention. They were well aware of how much the human community needed divine love and justice.

“The people who walked in darkness...” We are that people. There’s no avoiding that truth in our time. We need the light that comes with incarnation more than ever.

I suspect Christmas may turn out to hold deep meaning for us this year – perhaps more than when it seems the only thing we have to worry about is buying the right gifts. We now comprehend the hope of those across history who have waited for a Messiah to bring good news to a world desperate to hear it.

Let us enter this sacred and beautiful season expecting that the great light of which the prophets of old spoke will shine through the night that has descended on much of the earth.

And when we get to the manger let us join in singing from our homes (and over the livestream), “Joy to the world, the Lord has come!”

See you in church – online.

Grace and peace,

From Our Pastor
What happens when you die? I am not asking about spiritually, but instead have you ever wondered what happens to your body when you die? What preparations, procedures, processes, or rituals happen after death? The December New Old Adventure session will focus on this question and on memorial service planning.

Our New Old Adventure program team is busy developing next semester’s offerings of educational forums designed for older adults in our community but welcome to all. Mark your calendars for January 13, February 10, March 10, April 13, and May 11. We are planning a diverse range of topics spanning from faith formation to health care reform to eco justice. To receive updates about programs and for the Zoom link to the December event, contact Deb Wagner, dwagner@wpc-mpls.org.

A Christmas Quiet Worship
Saturday, December 19 | 9 am
You are invited come together for A Christmas Quiet Worship, with remembered words from Thomas Merton’s "Blessing for a Winter's Morning," sung prayers, Scripture, and silence. With gathering in person still on hold, you are invited to download the Quiet Worship bulletin from the Westminster website (westminstermpls.org/additional-worship-opportunities). . . to then gather in your own special place . . . to read or pray the bold-face words quietly, out loud . . . knowing that they are being read or prayed by others at the same time . . . by a cloud of witnesses.
**Transitions in the Health and Healing Ministry**

*by David Tsai Shinn, Associate Pastor*

The book of Ecclesiastes says, “To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven.” For 22 years, Jane Ellen Nielsen served our church as a faithful deacon and volunteer to the Health and Healing ministry. She began her membership here at Westminster in 1996 and was ordained a deacon in 1998. With a team of health care professionals, she envisioned a new health ministry in 2002. First the team offered blood pressure screenings, then the educational bulletin boards followed. For the last five years, I had the privilege to serve alongside Jane as she expanded the ministry to include the annual intergenerational health care fair, the monthly sacred healing services, and service to the Magnet Senior Center. As her season of service comes to an end, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Jane for her many years of service to the church. She has been a “good and faithful servant” of Christ.

I would also like to introduce our new Health and Healing ministry leader, Michelle Henry. An adult-gerontology nurse practitioner at MN Health Fairview Hospital, Michelle and her husband, a fellow medical professional, have been faithful members of Westminster for several years. We welcome Michelle, and look forward to her continuing Jane’s legacy of caring for our members.

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**Tablets for Seniors**

*by Angelique Kingsbury, Coordinator, Magnet Senior Program*

This December, Westminster will collect donations for the “Gifts for Seniors” program as well as a new project called “Tablets for Seniors.” Each year we know seniors struggle with isolation during the winter months in Minnesota, but this year many seniors are feeling the isolation more acutely than ever because of COVID-19. Through the Tablets for Seniors program, we want to provide Amazon Fire tablets pre-loaded with apps especially relevant for seniors to those in our community. Starting December 1, we encourage you to donate online (giftsforseniors.org/tablets-for-seniors) and help us reach our $6,681 goal to provide 100 tablets to seniors in our community.

You can also purchase gifts for seniors through online gift registries on the “Gifts for Seniors” website (giftsforseniors.org). We may not see the big, blue barrel after church at Westminster this December, but we hope you will still remember our seniors!

This year’s donation drive is supported by The Magnet Senior Center as part of Westminster’s senior ministries. Donations are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law. Questions? Contact Angelique Kingsbury, akingsbury@wpc-mpls.org or call 612.332.3421 x211.

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**Christmas Joy Offering**

*by Alanna Simone Tyler, Associate Pastor*

During the Advent and Christmas season, as we are renewing and deepening our understanding of “God with us” (Matthew 1:23), Westminster is invited to join Presbyterians across the country in supporting the Christmas Joy Offering. Through this special offering we commit to accompanying those who have been called to leadership. A portion of the gifts received will be directed to the Assistance Program of the Board of Pensions (BOP) to provide critical financial assistance to current and retired church workers in their time of need. Last year housing supplements from the BOP helped more than 249 households remain in their homes, afford assisted living, or continue in long-term care. An equal portion of the gifts received will be directed to prepare future leaders studying at three Presbyterian-affiliated schools. Young people of all faiths are welcome at the three schools: Menaul School in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Presbyterian Pan American School in Kingsville, Texas; and Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Thank you for your past support of the Christmas Joy Offering. We’ll receive the offering, **Sunday, December 20**. You may give by using the provided envelope and mailing a check to Westminster with the designation Christmas Joy in the memo line. You may also donate online by visiting the Westminster webpage and selecting “Special Offerings” under the “Give” menu. From there you can select “Christmas Joy” in the drop-down menu of the “Choose Fund” box.
Honoring Three Westminster Women
by Sarah Brouwer, Associate Pastor

Nearly every year since 1948, several Westminster women (and occasionally a man!) have been chosen to receive the Presbyterian Women Lifetime Honorary Membership. We award women who have been faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in a variety of ways within the Church. On behalf of each recipient, Westminster sends a financial gift to the local and national Presbyterian Women and Justice and Mission arm of the PC(USA), so their efforts live on to support a number of essential ministries.

This year we honor Nancy Van Drunen, Song Lee, and Marie Kruskop. Nancy Van Drunen is a long-time member, ordained deacon, and participant in Westminster on Wednesdays, often giving other women a ride so they can attend. Song Lee is an ordained and currently serving elder, who has served our youth program, confirmation students, stewardship team, nominating committee, and more. Marie Kruskop is now a staff member, but is also an ordained elder who has spent decades doing ministry with the parents of our congregation through Moms Group, Family Matters, and Families, Youth and Children Council. She has also participated in grief ministry, FEAST, and been a liaison for the Church Vocations Team.

In the spirit of the founding of Presbyterian Women, which formed in the late 1800s before women were able to be ordained and serve in decision-making positions, and so women could do the mission work of the church, we amplify the ministry of women and name their accomplishments. Well done, good and faithful servants!

Service of Remembrance
by David Tsai Shinn, Associate Pastor

Back in June, we invited everyone to join us for a special mid-year Service of Remembrance. We were three months into a pandemic that had no end in sight. Now nearly seven months later, the end is again beyond the horizon. This sounds like grief because grief has no end.

On December 1 at 6 pm, we invite you to livestream our Service of Remembrance. COVID-19 has made difficult moments even more difficult. Holidays without our loved ones can be sorrowful. Some of us are still waiting for the comforting ritual of memorial services for us to express our grief and to celebrate our loved ones’ lives.

We would like to invite you to bring the memories of your beloved spouse, sibling, parent, and other family members, and together let us remember them.

Welcoming Rev. Alexandra Mauney
by Meghan Gage-Finn, Executive Associate Pastor

As the Westminster community prepares for Advent, we are also preparing to welcome Rev. Alexandra Mauney, new Associate Pastor for Families, Youth, and Children (FYC). Alexandra begins her ministry on December 1, coming to Minneapolis from First Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, NC, where she has served as Pastoral Resident since August of 2019.

The FYC Council is excited to offer several opportunities to connect with Alexandra and to begin building relationships. We will have the chance to greet Alexandra on Wednesday, December 2, from 5:45-6:15 pm during fellowship time before mid-week Church School. Alexandra will also be present on Saturday, December 5 at 8:30 am for Nursery Family Fellowship, and then other families may join at 9 am for a final meet-and-greet gathering. On Sunday, December 20, Alexandra will lead Family Education Hour, sharing stories and songs for the season, and she will preach both services on Sunday, December 27. Look to the weekly FYC email for Zoom information for the above gatherings, and follow the FYC Facebook Group for additional connections. We give thanks for the Spirit’s leading in Alexandra’s life and look forward to sharing in ministry with her!
Near the end of October, Rev. Sarah Brouwer, Associate Pastor for Congregational Life, shared the news with the congregation that she has accepted a call to serve as Senior Pastor at St. Paul’s United Church of Christ in St. Paul. We wish Sarah well in this new call in ministry, but she will be missed! She leaves Westminster after five and a half years, leading WestConnect Young Adult Ministries, Leadership Development, Hospitality and All-Church Events, Women’s Ministries, and Communications Ministries. Sarah was integral in the creation of Gathered at Five, and has nurtured that Sunday evening service into a space for joyful worship and community.

As of this writing, the Personnel Committee and staff team are working on a proposal to bring to Session that will ensure the continuation of the thriving ministries Sarah has led. Sarah will conclude her pastoral work among us until the end of November. We can look forward to hearing her preach on her final Sunday, November 29, and we will have the chance to celebrate her ministry with a special Coffee Hour gathering following morning worship.

With gratitude to God for Sarah’s leadership among us, we wish her and her husband, Ben, and their children Gwen and Martin, well. May God bless and keep them in this new call and next chapter in their lives!

Celebrating Sarah Brouwer
by Meghan Gage-Finn, Executive Associate Pastor

Adult Education
by Rachel Sheild Gustafson, Director of Congregational and Community Engagement

This year, Adult Education has been exploring the theme Reckoning with Privilege: Where Christ Leads the Church When the World is Disrupted. Throughout this fall, experts have offered challenging and inspiring insights exploring theological frameworks related to privilege. Next, for our spring offerings, we’ll shift the focus to applying that theology to our everyday existence. Whether in parenting and family life; business, finance, and entrepreneurship; health care; human services; or art and culture; in whatever field God has called us, what does it look like to follow Jesus’ lead to contend with privilege? When the alarm rings and as our feet hit the ground every morning, what steps can we take to dismantle systemic barriers to peace and justice in our hearts, homes, and communities?

To that aim, Adult Ed is identifying people in our community and beyond who are acknowledging the problem of reckoning with privilege in their own lives and looking for ways, through a variety of vocational lenses, to dismantle it. Each session we will focus on a particular field, inviting a leader in that arena to engage our community in conversation around how reckoning with privilege looks in their specific vocation. How has their own faith formation impacted their work and what ideas do they have for how we might more fully engage our beliefs and values in ours? We’ll discuss the opportunities and challenges applying theology to our jobs. For more information or to suggest a vocational leader, contact me (rgustafson@wpc-mpls.org).

Sunday Morning Adult Education:

November 29 and December 6:
Paul Capetz, “Church and Theology in a Time of Pandemic: A Conversation with Matt Skinner”

December 13:

December 20:
Matthew Skinner, “Merry Christmas: How the Bible’s Nativity Stories Rebuke Our Empires”

December 27:
No Adult Education hour.
Christmas Pageant
by Meghan Gage-Finn, Executive Associate Pastor

There is good news on the way—do not fear! The traditions of the Westminster Christmas Eve Pageant will continue this year, with fun modifications. As in past years, the children and youth of the church age 3 and older will lead in worship through Scripture and song on December 24 at 4 pm. This year, rather than being in person, the pageant will be offered as a livestream service of a Zoom recording, combined with other video segments. All will be stitched together into one collaborative story. As we share in the preparation process together, at home, rehearsals will be less intensive and costing minimal, and there will be ways for children who prefer not to be on camera to participate. We can all celebrate in worship on Christmas Eve from home, perhaps with family members near and far joining in the livestream, too. We will still delight in the cacophony of the angel chorus, the baa-ing of the sheep, as the Westminster’s youngest ones help us hear anew the Christmas story and the coming of God’s light into the world!

There will be two Zoom rehearsals to practice lines and record, at noon on Sundays, November 29 and December 6 for sheep, shepherds, and angels. Other speaking and music parts will be folded in through pre-recorded segments. Contact Sonja Dziekciowski at sonja@wpc-mpls.org if your family would like to be involved!

It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas
by Rodney Allen Schwartz, Director, Westminster Gallery and Archive

While the Westminster building remains closed to members and visitors alike, we are preparing for worship during Advent and Christmas that will incorporate many familiar spaces decorated in the traditional Westminster way. So many people express nostalgic memories of the fragrant swags of evergreen as they stroll down the Cloister Hall each year. The cascade of poinsettias, wreaths, and trees that make the candlelit sanctuary so lovely will still be there. Christmas Eve worship will center around a vintage crèche on the communion table as in past years.

What will be so different is that we will experience this holy season through the livestream and not together as a congregation sitting side-by-side in the pews. We are working diligently to reflect all the beloved traditions into the new and temporary way of being church together. Many services will originate in Westminster Hall and they will have familiar elements including the Advent candelabra.

A veritable forest of Christmas trees will be new this year, providing a backdrop for Westminster Hall worship and creating an extended Window Gallery facing Nicollet Mall. Imagine the Westminster Gallery transformed into a 35-foot-long display case accessible to all who visit the west side of our church! This exhibition will open Saturday, November 28, with an Advent focus and will evolve in content throughout the season as we approach the birth of the Christ child, and again as Epiphany approaches. Plan on parking briefly on the drive-through on Marquette and walking around the building to visit the new gallery throughout Advent and Christmas.

Nursery Lessons and Carols
by Marie Kruskop, Coordinator of Early Childhood and Family Ministries

“And in that warm, dark stable his life began.” So ends the story of Jesus’ birth as told in the children’s book The First Night by B. G. Hennessy. Join us to hear the entire story for December’s Early Childhood Family Fellowship event - a pint-sized version of Lessons and Carols. This annual event (this year over Zoom rather than in the Nursery) celebrates the birth of Jesus in word and song. We will sing beloved carols and listen to the story The First Night.

We are committed to finding ways to build community and to connect, even when apart. Join us for this special celebration on Saturday, December 5 at 8:30 am. Contact Marie Kruskop, mkruskop@wpc-mpls.org, for Zoom information.
January All-Church Book Read: 
*If Beale Street Could Talk*
by Trish Van Pilsum, Westminster member

"Love brought you here. If you trusted love so far, don’t panic now." -James Baldwin

Please join us for the most important all-church book read yet. *If Beale Street Could Talk* by James Baldwin is the story of a hopeful, young couple whose lives are upended by a false criminal charge. It celebrates the power of love within and among Black families in the face of racial injustice. In the words of one reviewer, “It is a moving, painful story…but ultimately optimistic.” The selection committee sought a book that addresses the generational impact of America’s violent racial past and present. *If Beale Street Could Talk* does this beautifully. Published in 1974, the book is just as timely today.

We recommend buying the book at Black Garnet Books, a Black, woman-owned bookstore in the Twin Cities (bookshop.org/shop/blackgarnetbooks). Small group discussions will take place on Zoom on January 10, 24, and 31. As of press time, we are working to confirm that Eddie Glaude, Jr., James Baldwin scholar and November’s Town Hall Forum speaker, will join us on January 31. If you would like to explore this compelling book with our church community, please sign up by emailing mhamilton@wpc-mpls.org.

**FYC’s Holiday Programming Schedule**
by Marie Kruskop, Coordinator of Early Childhood and Family Ministries

*Wednesday evening* FYC programming (Family Fellowship, Church School, and Confirmation) will continue on December 2 and 9, with a special Christmas Carol Sing-along on December 16. Moms Group will meet December 2 – 16. There will be no FYC programming December 23 and 30; we resume our regular schedule on January 6.

Sunday morning FYC programming will continue as usual on December 6 and 13. On December 20, Family Matters will meet at 8 am and Family Education Hour will be a special time with our new Associate Pastor for Families, Youth, and Children Alexandra Mauney.

Youth Group programming on Sundays will continue as scheduled December 6-20. There will be no Sunday FYC programming on December 27; we resume our regular schedule on January 3.

Please refer to the FYC weekly email for the most up-to-date information about all things FYC! To sign up, contact Mahin Hamilton, mhamilton@wpc-mpls.org. Or check the website’s FYC calendar at westministermpls.org/fyc-calendar.
Peace and Not Knowing
by Sherri Dunham, MA, LPCC, Westminster Counseling Center

2020 is fraught with uncertainty and not knowing. As I write this, we have cast our votes in the presidential election and are already days into awaiting the final results. Years of regular meditation practice seem to be supporting me in ways I probably do not fully realize as I grapple with the present uncertainty.

Despite not knowing who our next president will be in this moment, a tremendous amount of information is known. We know of the deep divides that exist in our country, communities, and families. We know of the suffering and oppression that exists for people who do not look like the majority of leaders of this country. We know there is a great lack of peace within many of us individually and collectively.

In the school of Zen Buddhism, shikantaza is the practice of “just sitting” in silence; resting in a space of emptiness that goes beyond our ideas of understanding and knowing. When practicing shikantaza, you are intentionally entering into a space of not knowing, where the small ego is not in the driver seat.

With regular practice over time, the initially anxiety-inducing space of not knowing seems to be increasingly replaced with the experience of peace.

The election outcome is not really the answer our hearts are looking for; the outcome is simply an indicator of our current conditions: a great lack of peace. Our hearts are seeking and longing for peace. But peace is not found “out there.” Peace is an inside job. It’s found “in here” when we rest in not knowing. When we individually connect with peace “in here,” it will collectively manifest “out there.”