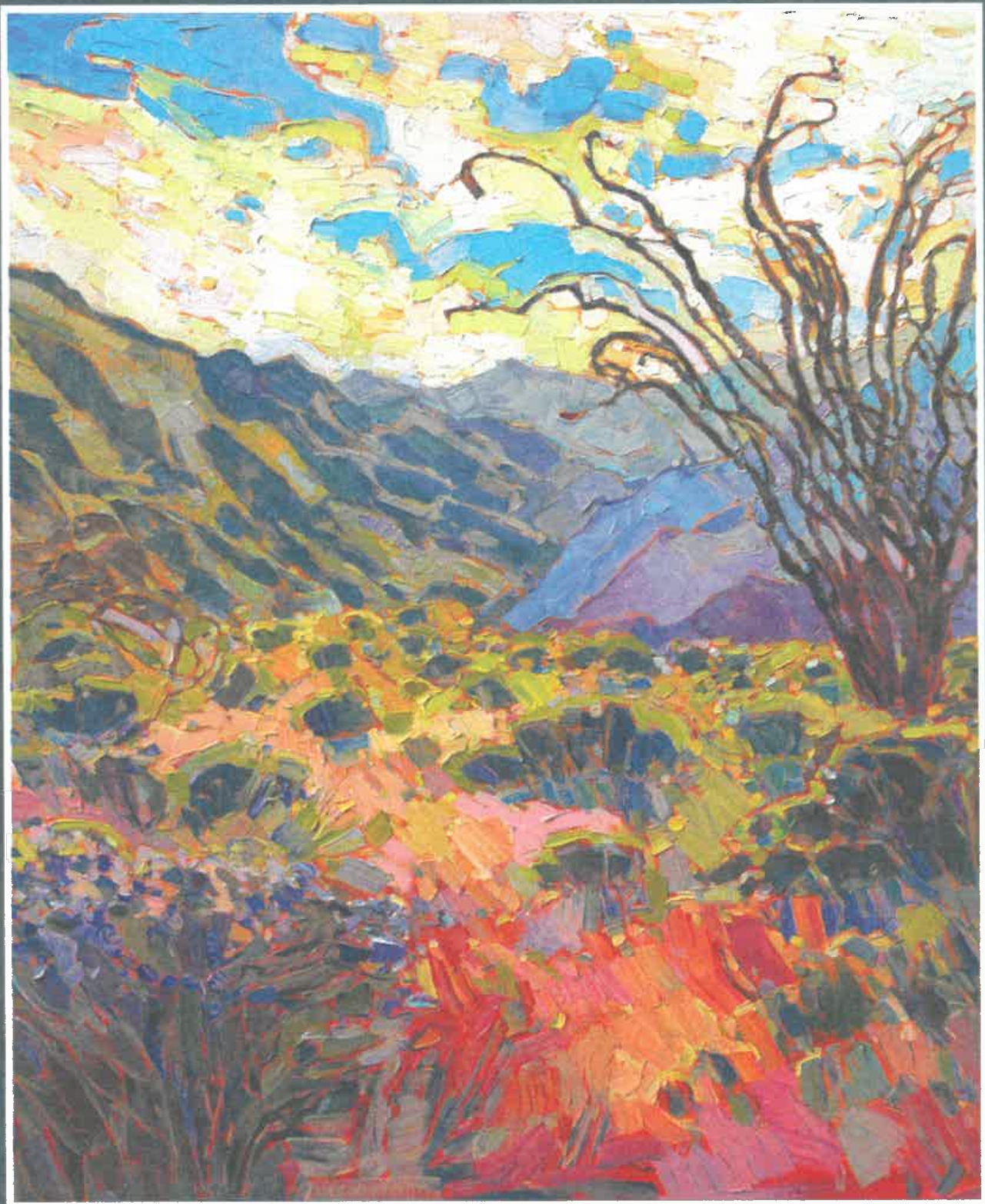


The desert shall
rejoice and
blossom

ISAIAH 35:1





December 14, 2025

The Third Sunday of Advent

--- *What do you fear?*

**even in our fear,
we are called forward**

Luke 1:26-39 | Jeremiah 1:4-10

Welcome to people new to this church or faith, long time Lutherans, and Christians from every tradition. Welcome to all who have no church home, want to follow Christ, have doubts, or do not believe. Welcome to new visitors and old friends. Welcome to people of every age and size, color and culture, sexual orientation and marital status, ability and challenge. Welcome to believers and questioners and questioning believers. This is a place where you are welcome to celebrate and sorrow, rejoice and recover. This is a place where lives are made new. Welcome on this day.

Music “There’s a Voice in the Wilderness”

Choir Introit— “Hark, A Thrilling Voice is Sounding”

Call to Confession

Friends, often in life, when we make mistakes,
we want to keep those mistakes to ourselves.
We don’t want to advertise our blunders.
We don’t want to highlight our failings.
We can be tempted to brush those things
under the rug and move on.
But when it comes to God,
there is nothing we need to brush under the rug.
God welcomes and loves our full, honest, messy selves—
blunders and all.
So let us go before God in prayer,
trusting that there is nothing we need to hide from our Creator. Let us pray.

Prayer of Confession

**Courageous God,
you invite us to live into our call.
You invite us to act, to serve, and to trust.
Instead of responding with a resounding “yes,”
we often hide our face.
We dig our heels in.
We look for someone else to volunteer.
Spark courage in us.
Remind us that every person is capable
of making a difference.
Remind us that even when we’re scared, we are not alone.
You invite us forward.
With baby steps we hope,
we pray,
Amen.**

Words of Forgiveness

Family of faith,
no matter where your path has led you in the past,
today is a new day.
So join me in declaring this good news:

**We are known. We are forgiven! We are sent to serve.
May we step forward in faith, always moving closer to
God’s call. Amen.**

*Opening Hymn

“Prepare the Royal Highway”

Red #264

1. Prepare the royal highway;
The King of kings is near!
Let ev’ry hill and valley
A level road appear!
Then greet the King of Glory,
Foretold in sacred story: **REFRAIN**

(Hymn Continued)

REFRAIN

Hosanna to the Lord, For he fulfills God's Word!

2. God's people, see him coming:
Your own eternal king!
Palm branches strew before him!
Spread garments! Shout and sing!
God's promise will not fail you!
No more shall doubt assail you! REFRAIN

3. Then fling the gates wide open
To greet your promised king!
Your king, yet ev'ry nation
Its tribute too may bring.
All lands will bow before him;
Their voices join your singing: REFRAIN

4. His is no earthly kingdom;
It comes from heav'n above.
His rule is peace and freedom
And justice, truth, and love.
So let your praise be sounding
For kindness so abounding; REFRAIN

*Greeting

P: The steadfast love of God, the life of Jesus Christ
and the power of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

C: And also with you.

Call to Worship

Jeremiah said, “I am only a boy.”

Moses said, “Who am I to do this work?”

Mary said, “How can this be?”

We often say, “But God, I am afraid.”

Even when we are afraid, God invites us closer.

So may we trust the Inviter.

May we heed God’s invitation.

May we summon our courage and sing God’s praise.

Let us worship our courageous, inviting, calling God. Amen!

Candle Lighting — Joy

In a world full of fear, where do you see
glimmers of joy?

**We see glimmers of joy in birthday
candles and homemade cards. We see joy
in the laughter of children and the delight
of grandparents. We see joy in meals
around the table and in the singing of
Christmas songs.**

You are right. Even in a fearful world, joy
is all around us.

Today we light the candle of joy as a
reminder of this good news. May this
flicker of light help us remember that
even in a fearful world, joy is here. Joy is
real. We only have to look for it.

(Light candle)

**Thanks be to God for that good news!
Amen.**

Kyrie

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” # 257 vs. 1 ~ 2

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

REFRAIN

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel,
Shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, O Wisdom from on high
embracing all things far and nigh:
in strength and beauty come and stay;
Teach us your will and guide our way. REFRAIN

Hymn of Praise

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” #270 vs 1 & 3

Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.”
Joyful, all you nations, rise;
Join the triumph of the skies;
With angelic hosts proclaim,
“Christ is born in Bethlehem!”

REFRAIN

Hark! The herald angels sing,
“Glory to the newborn king!”

Hail the heav’n born Prince of Peace!
Hail the sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Ris’n with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
Born to raise each child of earth,
born to give us second birth REFRAIN

*Prayer of the Day

P: May God be with you.
C: **And also with you.**
P: Let us Pray. Celebrate pg. 1

The Word of God

God Stories

First Reading Isaiah 35:1-10 Celebrate pg. 1

L: Word of God, Word of Life.
C: **Thanks be to God.**

Psalm 146 Choir & Congregation Celebrate pg. 2

Second Reading James 5:7-10 Celebrate pg. 3

P: Word of God, Word of Life.
C: **Thanks be to God.**

(Please stand as you are able)

Gospel Acclamation

“Angels We Have Heard on High” #289 vs. 1

Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly singing o’er the plains
And the mountains in reply
Echoing their joyous strains

G l o r i a . . . in excelsis Deo
G l o r i a . . . in excelsis Deo

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. Mathew
C: Glory to you, O God.

*Gospel Reading Matthew 11:2-11 Celebrate pg. 3

P: The Gospel of the Lord.
C: Praise to you, O Christ.

Sermon

Rev. James Lapp

*Hymn of the Day

“Each Winter As the Year Grows Older”

#252

Each winter as the year grows older,
We each grow older too.
The chill sets in a little colder;
The verities we knew
Seem shaken and untrue.

When race and class cry out for treason,
When sirens call for war,
They overshout the voice of reason
And scream till we ignore
All we held dear before.

Yet I believe beyond believing,
That life can spring from death:
That growth can flower from our grieving;
That we can catch our breath
And turn transfixed by faith.

So even as the sun is turning
To journey to the north,
The living flame, in secret burning,
Can kindle on the earth
And bring God's love to birth.

O Child of ecstasy and sorrows,
O Prince of peace and pain,
Brighten today's world by tomorrow's,
Renew our lives again;
Lord Jesus, come and reign!

Affirmation of Faith

**We have seen the valley.
We have seen a sky without stars.
We have seen the longest night, and *still* we believe.
We believe in a with-us God.
We believe that good news is louder than fear.
We believe this good news is for all people.
So even when our knees shake,
even when our voice trembles,
even when fear is all around us,
we will hold onto that good news.
We will reach for each other.
We will look for God in our midst.
We will sing songs of joy.
We will proclaim: *Unto us, love is born.*
We have seen the longest night,
and we have seen unimaginable love.
So *still*, we believe. Amen.**

***Prayers of the People**

Calling God,
if you tapped on my shoulder today,
would my knees shake? Would my mind race?
Would my voice waver?
Or,
knowing the stories of all the faithful folks you've called before,
would I be ready?
Would I be brave enough to follow?
Would I hear your call for what it is?
Would I reply, "*Let it be with me according to your will*"?
It's hard to know.
But what I do trust is that you are a God who calls.
You called Mary and Moses, Jeremiah and Peter.
You have called ordinary people throughout all of time.
You have called artists and activists, poets and prophets,
teachers and healers—young and old alike.

So as we move through this world,
open our ears to hear your voice.
As we move through this world,
open our hearts to the invitations, the inspiration,
and the nudges you place in our lives.
As we move through this world, God,
allow us to hear whatever call you have
in store for us in this season.
For no matter how big or how small,
we trust that you are a calling, inviting, nudging, inspiring
God who sees us in the best light.
With hope we lean forward, we listen for your word,
and we pray together the words your son taught us to pray,
even if our voices shake, saying. . .

*Prayers of Intercession

Celebrate pg. 4

Thank you for the beauty of nature
as we welcome a new season.
Thank you for the contagious joy of children.
Thank you for homemade meals
and the kindness of strangers.
Thank you for music that ascends our spirits,
and scripture that points to your presence.
It can be hard to put into words how grateful we truly are.
And all God's children said: **Amen.**

The Communion Meal

*Passing of the Peace

P: May the peace of God be with you always.

C: **And also with you.**

Offering — We honor and worship God by returning some of
the gifts with which we have been blessed.

Music “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee”
Music, Ludwig Van Beethoven

Offertory “O Come, All Ye Faithful” Red #283 vs. 1

O come, all ye faithful
Joyful and triumphant
O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem
Come and behold him
Born the King of angels

REFRAIN

O come, let us adore him. O come, let us adore him
O come, let us adore him. Christ the Lord

*Eucharistic Prayer

We live in a fearful world.
If we're honest, we come to this Table today
with the taste of fear on our tongues.
We come to this Table carrying our anxiety.
We come to this Table asking for guidance.
We come to this Table with all of life's "what-ifs."

But you do not disregard our fear.
You do not brush it under the rug or call us foolish.
You do not ignore the realities in front of us.
You do not dish out empty or hurtful platitudes,
telling us to "toughen up" or "power through."
Instead, you meet us here.

You listen to our fears. You remind us that we are not alone.
You surround us with people who love us.
You show us where we are strong. You walk beside us.
And you give us a new song to sing.

So today we pray, gracious God:
replace the fear on our tongues
with words of hope and songs of joy.
As we come to this Table,
pour out your Spirit on this bread and cup.
Remind us that even in a fearful world,
you are on the move.
Remind us that even in a fearful world, you are here,
inviting us to the Table, nourishing our spirits,
reminding us that we belong, calling us by name.

Instill that good news in us, for this is a joyful feast.
Fear is not the loudest voice today.
What a gift that is.
Now with hope for a better tomorrow,
we join our voices together in thanksgiving to you.

*Great Thanksgiving

May God be with you.
And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.
We lift them up to God.

Let us give our thanks to God.
It is right to give our thanks and praise.

*Words of Institution

*Lord's Prayer

**C: Our Father, in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today, our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom,
the power and the glory are yours
Now and forever. Amen**

(You may be seated)

*Invitation to the Table

Here at this Table, there is enough room, enough food,
enough love for everyone.

Here at this Table, Jesus is standing up on his chair,
waving his hands over his head, saying to each of you,
“I saved you a seat!”

Here at this Table, you are wanted and welcomed.

Here at this Table, you are safe and loved.

Here at this Table, you belong.

So my friends, there is no need for fear here,
for this is a joyful feast, and you are invited.

Come. All are truly welcome.

Holy Communion

Guests; You are welcome to come forward to receive Communion as part of this church family! Please receive the bread and dip into the cup. The wine is red. The grape juice is white. Children are always welcome to come forward and receive Holy Communion or a special blessing—parents please provide direction.

Lamb of God

“Love Has Come” Red #292 vs. 1 & 3

Love has come a light in the darkness!
Love shines forth in the Bethlehem skies.
See, all heaven has come to proclaim it;
Hear how their song of joy arises:
Love! Love! Born unto you, a Savior!
Love! Love! Glory to God on high!

Love has come and never will leave us!
Love is life everlasting and free.
Love is Jesus within and among us,
Hear how their song of joy arises:
Love! Love! Love is the gift of Christmas.
Love! Love! Praise to you, God on high!

Communion Hymn

“There is a Longing in Our Hearts” ACS #1078 blue

REFRAIN

*There is a longing in our hearts, O lord,
for you to reveal yourself to us.*

*There is a longing in our hearts for love
we only find in you, our God.*

For justice, for freedom, for mercy:

Hear our prayer.

In sorrow, in grief:

Be near; hear our prayer, O God. REFRAIN

For wisdom, for courage, for comfort:

Hear our prayer.

In weakness, in fear:

Be near; hear our prayer, O God. REFRAIN

For healing, for wholeness, for new life:

Hear our prayer. In sickness, in death;

Be near; hear our prayer, O God. REFRAIN

Lord, save us, take pity, light in our deepest night.

We call you; we wait:

Be near; hear our prayer, O God. REFRAIN

The Sending

*Communion Blessing

P: May this Holy Communion of our Lord Jesus Christ
strengthen you and keep you in God's grace
now and forever.

C: Amen.

* Prayer After Communion

Loving God,
When the world is racked with fear,
you gather us together.
You set the table. You meet us here.
You nourish our bodies as you nourish our spirits.
You remind us that this is a joyful feast,
and that fear cannot win every time.
So with renewed courage, with renewed hope,
with renewed conviction, send us out into the world.
Help us to feed others as you have fed us.
With gratitude we pray, **Amen.**

*Blessing

May you look for God's spirit.
May you reach for each other's hands.
May you choose courage whenever you can.
And in all things, may you remember
that good news is louder than fear.
In the Name of the One who calls,
+ the One who sends,
and the One who journeys with—
Amen.

*Closing Hymn

“Christ, Be Our Light”

Red #715

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
Light for the world to see.

(Hymn continued)

REFRAIN

*Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness. Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.*

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has pow'r to save us.
Make us your living voice. *REFRAIN*

Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
Shared until all are fed. *REFRAIN*

Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
Walls made of living stone. *REFRAIN*

Many the gifts, many the people,
Many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
Signs of your kingdom come. *REFRAIN*

*Dismissal

Go in peace and *Be Not Afraid*.
Thanks be to God!

Music “In Dulci Jubilo” Traditional

*The Altar Flowers are given by
Shelly Barker
In honor of Matthew's birthday*



Prayer Concerns

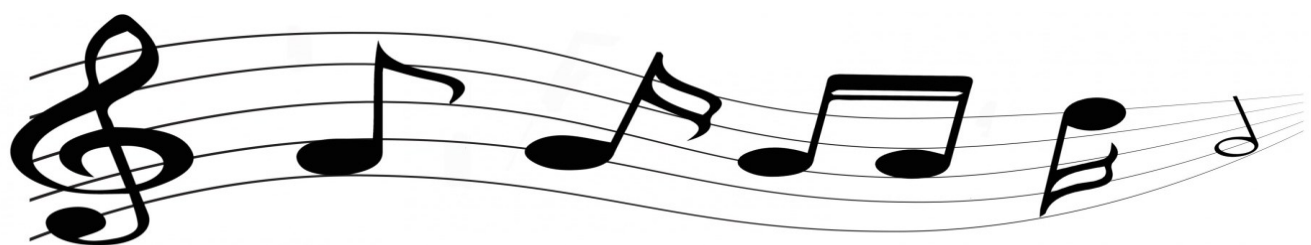
SHORT TERM

Sina & Bella, Katie's family, Chad Fields, Laura, Ayla, Tate & Terry, Beth Stiles, Margaret Schraft, Laura & twin babies, James, Don & Taiyo, Chris Wyneken, Gary

& Connie Stevenson, Family of Bobbie Erickson, Kevin, Marc Northcott, Cheryl & David Craig, Beth, Liz, Joan Wilson Family, Sam, Florence, Tom Williams, Tim Oldfield, Kathy M., Nancy, Jennifer Linkeon, Corrine & Daniel, Connie Garcia & Family, Tina & family, Ana, Kathybelle Barlow, Family & friends of Rev. Jim Carr, Grey, Levi, James, Galahad, Debbie, Sam, Nate Barker, Robbin, Keith, Noelle, Ensley, Middle East Peace, Tom Dawson, Dustin, Father Jack Davis, Adolfo, Elida, Jeannie, Anetta, Jane, Barbara Allen, Gary & Marjie Toops, Rachel B., Anne & Chloe Johnston, Isaac & Marissa, Mateo & Lina, Atlas, Sal, Katarina, Stephanie Jager.

LONG TERM

Those suffering with Mental Illness, James Sheehan, Biergiel—Colclough family, Eric Utto-Galarneau, Brian Utto, Kathy Brooks, Joel Hurtgamm, Dawit and family (Ethiopia), Miller, April, Aaron Johnson, Shelby, Ashley, Frank, Joe, Lisa & Beau, Linda Johnson, Jan Shadle, Vi Olly, Mike, Susan Anderson, Brouse Family, Janet Baker, Sandy Godvine, Janelle Yung, Karin, Will, Chris & John B., Immigrant families, The Homeless, People of Ukraine, People of Palestine/Israel, Our Nation's leaders, Mt. Cross, St. Stephen's Child Development Ctr, S.S. Senior Housing, Pastor Jim & Our Church Family, men & women of Armed Forces, and the Youth of today.



Music at St. Stephen's

The Joys of Advent, Christmas,
and the four seasons . . .

Is there music in heaven above, with singing, rejoicing, humming, loud crashing planets, circling round each other and creating their own *JOY*? I think there is indeed!

There is great Joy on our planet, when we come together, and give thanks for what we have, where we live freely to worship God in our own ways, and express our happiness, our voices, and give to others who have less than we. The four seasons of God are signs of completeness, Hope, Peace, Joy and Love, balance in the universe.

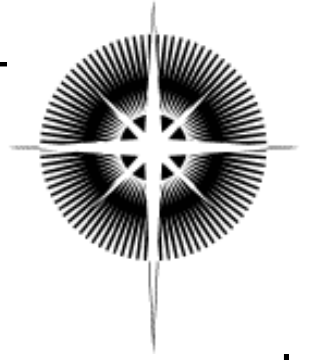
My joy is to express myself through music, and worshiping God this way and our congregation together.

Welcome to your church, and the
Advent—Christmas Adventure!

Yours in Christ & Mission,
Gary



Give a Gift. Change a Life.



What better way to celebrate the season of Jesus' birth than to give gifts of comfort and joy to those who are in need. Give meaningful gifts that inspire leadership, nourish the hungry and heal the sick.

Santa Cruz al Salvador Sister Parish

provide scholarships, school supplies, pure water and composting toilets in two rural poverty communities.

Lutheran World Relief improve the lives of people living in poverty around the world. A Goat not only provides a woman farmer with milk to sell, but also helps her build a herd. Coffee seedlings help a farmer grow a lucrative crop that has the potential to significantly improve income. Seeds help farmers grow more and better crops when climate conditions are challenging. Emergency Water delivers potable water after disaster strikes. 1-800-597-5972

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

stands ready to welcome the most vulnerable refugees who are seeking safety and hope in America. Our gifts are essential in rebuilding their lives. Gifts from "Basic Needs Kit" to "Ready for Work kit" can mean so much to those who have nothing but the clothes on their backs. **LIRS.org or 877-291-7061**

Lutheran Social Services of Nor. Cal. serves our neighbors with compassion and justice. This partnership creates pathways from homelessness, empowers young adults out of foster care, a true witness of hope. Lssnorcal.org

S.P.I.N. Socks for People in Need (box in narthex)

NEW socks are a blessing for many reasons, especially health, but also because they provide comfort and a sense of dignity.



Help decorate the sanctuary for Christmas. Donate in honor or in memory of loved ones and it will be listed in the Christmas Eve bulletin. To order, call the office. Cost is \$15. Please make the check payable to St. Stephen's, with memo "poinsettia". You may take your plant home after worship to enjoy. Proceeds benefit our church ministries.

The Season of Giving

This holiday season, we thank everyone who has supported St. Stephen's this past year with their time, talent and financial contributions and look forward to support from all of our members in the year ahead.

If you need a convenient way to make regular offerings or if you plan to make an additional gift before the end of the year, we encourage you to check out our electronic giving options. As the pace of life speeds up, especially around the holidays, you may find electronic giving a most welcome way to make contributions.

For more info. contact Janet Slay 475-5668

Your 2026 Offering envelopes are here, if you'd like to stop by and pick them up. Call the office and we can leave them outside 476-4700.

God uses money to confirm direction.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight." Proverbs 3:5-6

Upcoming Events:

December Benevolence = Lutheran World Relief

- | | |
|---------|---|
| TODAY | MMRR Boutique & Bakesale
With Special exhibit of Donna Harris' art work |
| Dec. 15 | Embroiders Guild 7:00 pm |
| Dec. 16 | Scouts 6:00 pm |
| Dec. 17 | - Preschool chapel 10:15 am
- Bible Study "Gospel of Promised Blessings" 7:30 p |
| Dec. 18 | - Women's Café Group 6:30 pm offsite
- Mens beginner A.A. 7:00 pm |
| Dec. 19 | - Newsletter Deadline NOON
- A. A. Group 7:00 pm |
| Dec. 21 | - Brass plays during 10 am worship
- Christmas Potluck (Gary provides the ham) 11 am |
| Dec. 24 | Christmas Eve Worship 7:00 pm |
| Dec. 29 | Newsletter Collating 1:00 pm |
| Jan. 6 | Trinity Tuesday 6:30 pm Discretion Brew 41st Ave.
Gather to explore how faith intersects with life.
Honest conversation and genuine community. |
| Jan. | Annual Meeting |
| Jan. 31 | Provide AFC Shelter Dinner 5:45—7:15 pm
St. John's 125 Canterbury Drive Aptos
Offer your resources to our neighbors without housing.
We are all worthy of dignity and connection. You can as
sist those without homes to a better life. (see sign up) |

Pastor's Office Hours Weds. & Thurs. 10:00 to 1:00

Worship online at www.ststephenslutheran.org

Recorded for you to view anytime.

Please participate by having your worship bulletin and Celebrate ready

Zoom Bible Studies with Pastor Jim on Wednesdays 7:30pm.

Check your email on Wednesday for the link to the Zoom meeting.

Our Mission Statement

St. Stephen's is a welcoming, healing community who worship
God in Christ, nurture people growing in faith,
serve others with acceptance and love,
invite people to share the joy of the spirit.

Reconciling in Christ

"We welcome all who are seeking God's love and grace.
We welcome all because God welcomes all, regardless of race
or culture, sexual orientation, gender identity,
gender expression, or relationship status.

We welcome all without regard to addictions, physical or
mental health, imprisonment, socio-economic circumstances,
or anything that too often divides us. Our unity is in Christ."

St. Stephen's Lutheran Church E.L.C.A.
2500 Soquel Avenue Santa Cruz, CA 95062
831/476-4700 FAX 831/476-3918
email: office@ststephenslutheran.org
Web Address: www.ststephenslutheran.org
Office Hours: Mon.—Friday. 12:00 —5:00 pm

Ministers: The People of St. Stephen's
Pastor: Rev. James P. Lapp
Church Administrator: Leslie Lapp
Church Musician: Gary Roberts
Sunday School: Leslie Lapp
Pre-School Director: Kathy Berens
Custodian: John Hopping
Videographers: Jay Johnston, Kent Madsen & Barb Rice

Music used by permission Onelicense #A-706539