

TIDINGS

St. Paul United Church of Christ

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Senior Pastor - Rev. Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas

Minister of Christian Education - Pastor Cheryl Schalm

December 2020

PASTOR'S PEACE

This coming week we begin the new season of Advent. Lasting four Sundays, it's intended to help us get ready for Christmas, recalling what life was like before Jesus came into the world and affirming anew our need for him as savior. The spirit of the season is symbolized by the lighting of our candles representing hope, peace, love, and joy. With each candle cumulatively lit, there is more light week by week. It all culminates in the lighting of the Christ Candle at the center of all the other candles on Christmas Eve as the sun goes down and the stars come out.

No matter how many times I have seen the Advent candles lit, it still moves me. We still need everything those candles represent, made possible through our faith in Jesus Christ. I am anticipating the lighting of our Advent candles more than ever because of what our nation and world are experiencing right now—this pandemic that has already felled many and brought sorrow to so many more. For me the candles are a reminder that for all our challenges right now, God, revealed through his son, remains an abiding presence who seeks to bring healing to our world—and will yet do so.

Advent and Christmas are going to be different for all of us all this. But the candles of Advent will be lit and, as always, will shine. May each be a beacon for us of a brighter tomorrow in Christ, through Christ, with Christ.

~ Shalom, Pastor Geoffrey Drutchas

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION EDITORIAL

As I sit to write this editorial, the snow continues to fall outside. Just two days ago I was doing yard work without a coat; today, I contemplate the possibility of having to shovel snow. How quickly things can change. While there was and remains much to be thankful for in "2020," there were and remains some great challenges, with a pandemic and the unrest of our nation topping the list. But greater than all the blessings and challenges that "2020" presented and continues to present, stands our Lord and Savior. Born one silent night in a stable amongst the cattle and sheep Mary gave birth to the

Christ child, the Savior of the world. God incarnated, entered the world and the world was changed forever. For some, this change presented threatening; they feared losing their power to the newborn king. While to others, the change was long awaited. They welcomed the songs of the angels and dropped everything to go and see for themselves the long awaited Messiah. Others brought gifts and traveled afar following the star that led them to the greatest King of all.

For certain, change can happen fast. And those touched by it often perceive it differently. This Christmas and New Year will be different for most. There will be changes to the familiar and normal. As we face the challenges, disappointments, frustrations, or whatever emotions we may be experiencing, let us take a moment to reflect upon that first Christmas. It is there that we will find peace, hope, love, joy and the promise of salvation brought to us through a baby lying in a manger. During our moments of darkness and despair, may we always remember that NOTHING can change the promise brought to us that night. Christ brought Joy to the World. So let all us faithful gather together, even if only in spirit, to proclaim and celebrate the birth of our Savior – the HOPE of the world.

Peace & Blessings and a very Merry Christmas.

~ *In Christ, Pastor Cheryl Schalm, Minister of Christian Education*

Rock Hard in Faith Youth Fellowship

Worship Wednesday's Young Adult Bible Study & Fellowship

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst. - John 6:35

Whether you have been a regular or are considering coming for the first time, we welcome and look forward to your company and participation. Please consider joining the Young Adult Bible Study group. All post-high school young adults are encouraged to come. We typically meet at Pastor Schalm's on Wednesday's at 7:00 p.m. however, due to the Covid uptick we will be meeting via Zoom until further notice.

Calling all College Students and Recent High School Graduates

Christian Education is in need of addresses of all St. Paul UCC college students and High School graduates enrolled in continuing education programs (trade school, skill programs, apprenticeships, etc.). Please forward addresses to Pastor Schalm or to the church office.

ALL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION EVENTS WILL BE HELD ACCORDING TO CDC AND STATE OF MICHIGAN COVID RECOMMENDATIONS AND LAWS. EVENTS WILL BE MONITORED AND CANCELLED IF DEEMED NECESSARY BASED ON SUCH.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Worship Services Live-Streamed for a Trio of Sundays

Due to a surge in Covid-19 cases across the nation and State of Michigan, on-site worship services and other activities have been suspended for three weeks through the week of December 6th. The decision was made at a specially-convened Council meeting on November 19 acting on the recommendation of the Executive Committee composed of Council officers. The meeting was held telephonically.

Although churches are not bound by restrictions mandated by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, the Council agreed for everyone's safety and the importance of providing a positive moral example it was best to suspend services and activities for the next several weeks. Public health circumstances will be evaluated again at that time by the Council, making a judgment about what activities can be safely resumed. The hope is that the present Covid-19 will taper off with the current public efforts underway and that our congregation will be able to celebrate Christmas according to plans that have already been made.

Our congregation has been rigorous in maintaining appropriate masking and social distancing in the sanctuary and other first floor rooms where activities are being held. The goal is to ensure a safe environment for all church members.

Church Being Decorated for Advent and Christmas

Some decorations are already up; others soon will be as our congregation gets ready for Advent and Christmas at St. Paul Church. A small team will be setting up and trimming the sanctuary Christmas tree on the weekend before the first Advent Sunday. Both the sanctuary and outdoor creches will also be installed in place. Additional lighting—a little more than usual—is additionally planned for the front of the church, alerting those traveling along Goddard Road that you can't cancel Christmas.

Although church members staying more at home this season may not be able to view the beautiful decorations at close hand, they will be seen in the Facebook live-streaming broadcast. Photos posted on the St. Paul UCC web site will be another way to view our sanctuary in its Christmas splendor.

Advent Season Begins

The Advent season, marking a new Christian year and preparing Christians for the Christmas celebration ahead, arrives on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, November 29th. For that Sunday, our congregation will be lighting our first Advent candle, symbolizing Hope. Our sanctuary's Christmas tree will also be lit for the first time at the end of the service. But the communion sacrament will be celebrated the following week on the first Sunday of December.

Since our congregation's suspension of on-site services continues through Sunday, December 6th, church members are encouraged to partake of the communion at home with bread and juice from household cupboards. Pastors Geoff Drutchas and Cheryl Schalm will be offering a prayer of consecration for all elements used.

Three Christmas Eve Services Planned

Three Christmas Eve Services are planned for December 24th at St. Paul Church. In lieu of more usual 7 and 11 p.m. services, Christmas Eve worship will be offered at 4, 7, and 10 p.m. The 4 and 10 p.m. services will be hosted in the sanctuary. The 7 p.m. service will be held outdoors in front of the church steps near the large creche except in case of severe weather necessitating a move indoors. Those attending the outside

service are asked to bring lawn chairs. All services will include the lighting of the Christ Candle, the sacrament of communion, and the congregational singing of "Silent Night." The outdoor service will include a short children's pageant with live animals.

Due to Covid-19 and our congregation's commitment to safeguard everyone's health, both masking and social distancing are required. Services will be limited to fifty participants. For indoor services those arriving will be ushered to their seats and dismissed by ushers afterwards to avoid any slowdown in the aisles that could compromise social distancing. Family members who arrive together can be seated together. Others will be seated, front to back of the sanctuary, when they first arrive. Packets with the order of service, communion elements, and a battery candle will be distributed to all worshippers upon arrival. The narthex lavatory will be available for sanctuary worshippers. For the outdoor service only, the West Lobby lavatories will be available for use.

In addition to the congregational singing of the traditional "Silent Night" Carol, Christmas music will be provided by solo and duet performers and our organist Sally Sigman. Pastors Geoff Drutchas and Cheryl Schalm will be leading the worship services. The 4 p.m. service will be livestreamed on Facebook and available for viewing through the hours of Christmas Eve for those remaining at home. During communion, church members and friends at home are invited to make use of bread and juice from their own kitchen to share in the sacrament. Pastor Drutchas will offer a special prayer of blessing and consecration for the bread and cup being shared in the sanctuary and at home.

For more information and the latest update on Christmas Eve Services please call the church office (313-291-1221) or check the St. Paul UCC website.

'Poinsettia Roll' Honors Loved Ones

In keeping with custom our sanctuary altar this Christmas will be decorated with a grouping of live poinsettias. But in lieu of individual plants requiring pick-up after our evening worship together the poinsettias in place will honor and commemorate all included in this year's "Poinsettia Roll"—a larger roster of the remembered and commemorated shared with Christmas Eve order of service and the January Tidings, as well as posted for the Twelve Days of Christmas season on our St. Paul Church website.

To have a family member or loved one remembered or honored, please include their name, special poinsettia dedication information, and a \$10 contribution in an envelope mailed to the church or deposited in the standing tithe box in the church narthex. Please indicate "Poinsettia Roll." All requests should be returned to the church no later than Friday, December 18th.

Annual Congregational Meeting Scheduled

The annual meeting of the St. Paul congregation will be held on Sunday, January 17, 2021. In addition to reviewing reports on our ministry and programs over the past year, the congregation will be voting on a new budget and a slate of nominees for Council leadership. The proposed 2021 budget will be sent to all church members in mid-December accompanied by a letter from the President-elect Timothy Ruffner.

The annual meeting will follow our 10 a.m. worship service that morning. Church members should sign in at the narthex and pick up a copy of their annual report.

HEALTH MINISTRIES

We are all disappointed due to the increase in Covid-19 cases causing further restrictions. We hope that you continue to social distance and wear masks/face shields to keep yourself and others safe. I also pray that you stay as healthy as you can. I look forward to a time in the future when I can once again make hospital, nursing home and in-house home visits to members. In the meantime, please call me with your concerns and health issues. We want to keep our prayer list up to date. Have a safe and meaningful holiday season and remember the Reason for the Season

Are You Running With Me Jesus?

Our St. Paul "Faith & Fitness" is continuing right through Three Kings Day, January 6th, encouraging all of our church members to stay active and healthy with daily exercise. The recommended exercise goal is 150 minutes weekly. But you choose the exercise and start at your own comfort level. Our St. Paul website program has a special feature to help incentivize you and track your progress. To make use of the web site exercise log, just click on (1) "What's Happening, (2) scroll to Faith & FITness Fun to 2021, and (3) choose your goal or enter weekly data. Not online? You can still participate. Speak with Parish Nurse Kathy Williams for assistance.

Exercise Class

Exercise classes have been postponed until further notice.

TOPS, - (Take Off Pounds Sensibly) Meetings Postponed

Due to covid-19 meetings are postponed until further notice. We hope to start again in mid-January. Contact Kathy Williams for more information.

Health/Medical Supplies Available

If you have or need medical supplies, such as walkers, wheelchairs, please contact our parish nurse or the office.

Our Daily Bread Devotional Availability

If you are interested in reading, Our Daily Bread, please contact the office. The editions are available in large print and regular print. Please specify the print type that you want. They come every three months. Kathy Williams can send a copy to you via mail until Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.

GENERAL ANNOUNCEMENTS

Confirmation Class Goes Zoom

Our St. Paul Confirmation class for 8th and 9th graders has gone zoom on Wednesday nights due to meeting restrictions arising from the Covid-19. Pastor Geoff Drutchas leads the online zoom class which had previously been gathering in our church's upstairs West Room at spread-out tables. Given their online experience with their regular school programs, all of the students are adept at navigating the zoom experience with confirmation class. Confirmation will return to on-site classes when the necessary meeting restrictions are lifted.

Pastoral Care Continues

Although hospitals and nursing homes have limited pastoral visits due to the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions on the number of visitors permitted on any given day, Pastors Geoff Drutchas and Cheryl Schalm and Parish Nurse Kathy Williams continue to be active in providing day-to-day pastoral care and healing prayer ministry through telephone calls and in some case front porch home visits, weather permitting. These visits are made without stepping into homes, while also maintaining masking and social distancing. An updated prayer list is kept and shared with the congregation on a weekly basis through the *Morning Tide* announcements. Prayer requests are welcomed.

Pastor Drutchas is in his church office daily (313-291-1221), answering incoming telephone calls. Please leave a voicemail or text message on his cell phone (313-319-1759) if he is not able to answer your church line call due to a simultaneous call or an out-of-the-office visit. Parish Nurse Kathy Williams can also be reached through the church office.

You Can Be An Angel

In these Advent and Christmas seasons there are opportunities to be an angel for others in need, children as well as adults. To purchase a Christmas gift for a child in need through the Salvation Army Angel Program contact Pastor Cheryl Schalm. Child sponsors receive by pick-up or mailing an envelope gift tag identifying the child's gender/age, a suggested gift list, plus instructions for gift drop-off.

Additionally or alternatively, your donations of hats, gloves, and underwear are welcomed for those in need (all ages). Your donated items can be dropped off at the west side office entrance to the church, deposited in Christmas Drive Hat & Glove Tote. Both, angel tag gifts and hats, gloves and undergarments need to be returned by noon on December 4th. All items will be delivered to the Salvation Army later that afternoon. Thank you in advance for your kindness and generosity.

Lastly, but just as important, your donations to Fish & Loaves and ChristNet are invited and encouraged. Just drop your donation in an envelope marked for either Fish & Loaves or ChristNet and our church staff will make sure it gets to the place you designate to help.

Don't let Covid-19 clip your angel wings! Questions? Contact Pastor Schalm or the church office (313-291-1221)

The "Christmas Fund Offering" for Retired UCC Clergy and Lay Persons will be received any Sunday in December

For over 100 years, the Christmas Fund for the Veterans of the Cross, one of our Special Mission Offerings of the UCC Church, has been a way to ensure that a light of love and hope will always shine for the faithful servants of our church denomination who find themselves facing unforeseen financial need.

One of the unique aspects of the Christmas Fund is that your offering provides direct financial assistance to individual UCC clergy and lay church employees. "Thank You" gift checks are provided to retired clergy and lay employees. With your continued generosity, these faithful servants will receive the support of the church in their time of need.

Think of the ways your life has been touched by a former clergy or lay person, and how important those experiences were for you. Your contributions do make a difference in the lives of many!

You will find a "Christmas Fund Veterans of the Cross" envelope included in this Tidings.

You may also use Vanco, our electronic online giving source for your UCC Christmas Fund donation. It is very easy to set-up a donation. Visit us online at www.stpaulucctaylor.org/giving, click on the blue Online Giving button, scroll down to the bottom of the "Donations" listing, and select UCC - Christmas Fund and enter the amount of your donation. Please contribute prayerfully, and as generously as you are able, to those who have served God so faithfully.

On behalf of the Stewardship of St. Paul, God Bless you, Merry Christmas, and Thank you.

St. Paul Tree of Faith - A Special Christmas Gift

Looking for that special Christmas Gift this year, leaves for our congregation's "Tree of Faith" are still available for those who wish to honor or commemorate family members and events. The cost of each commemorative leaf is \$300 with proceeds helping to pay off the "Room with a View" endowment loan. The ornamental tree located in the narthex is on the wall just outside the entrance to the new Family Room. Just talk with a Deacon any Sunday and ask for one of the blue "Tree of Faith" cards or contact Dan Case.

2020 Budget Status

Although overall donations were down again for the month of October we are still above our budget for income and well below our budget for expenses year-to-date. We expect to end the year on a very positive note. Your generous support during these troubled times is a true blessing. We will continue to monitor our spending through the remainder of 2020 and into 2021. St. Paul Treasurer - Dan Case

2021 Year Budget Planning Continues

The Budget and Finance Ministry met and developed a draft 2021 budget which was reviewed by the Council at their November 10th meeting. A final version of the 2021 budget will be presented for review at the December 8th Council meeting. The proposed budget once approved by the Council will be presented to the congregation at the Annual Meeting on Sunday, January 17, 2021 for final approval. If you have any questions regarding our budget development process, please contact Treasurer, Dan Case.

Advent for Ladies Cancelled

Dear St. Paul Ladies and friends. Unfortunately, we had to cancel our Advent for Ladies service. However, dozens of photos from previous years of "Advent by Candlelight" will soon be posted and shared online via Facebook, offering a stroll down memory lane and a visual reminder about what Advent and Christmas are really about. Watch for more info. Maybe you will see yourself!

2021 Wild Game Dinner Cancelled

The 2021 Wild Game Dinner has been cancelled: the committee felt there was no way to safely protect the 250 people who normally participate in this huge event in our own Fellowship Hall during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are currently evaluating alternative dates, but if we do not reschedule, we will see you in 2022. Thank You for your past support.

2021 Scrapbook Crop Cancelled

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Annual Scrapbook Crop that was scheduled for February in 2021, is cancelled. Please plan on joining us for our 2022 Scrapbook Crop.

Red Hot Purple Angels

We are cancelling meetings and outings until Covid-19 is under better control. We have decided as a group (by vote) to hold off giving secret pal gifts until we meet again as a group. Then we will choose a new Secret Pal. Stay safe!

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

IT Ministry – Volunteers needed

The St. Paul Information Technology Ministry is looking for volunteers to help as we expand our ministry. As many of you know; due to COVID, we were challenged with developing a platform that allowed live streaming from our Sunday Worship Services. We decided to utilize Facebook Live and that has worked out very well, however it has shown us that we need more than four people to successfully run our Church IT needs. As we move to more live streaming of our events, we will need additional help to be successful. Experience or knowledge is not a requirement, as we will provide the appropriate training. Communication to our members and friends is one of the most important goals that we have as we move into 2021.

We are looking for people who would like to learn or assist in the following areas: Wordpress Websites, Audio/Video Technologies (Streaming, Sound boards, etc), Social Media (Facebook Page Accounts, Twitter, etc.) and Data Infrastructure (Computers, Software, Networks, etc). If you are interested, please contact any member of the IT Ministry. Michael Isaacs, Gary Peters, or Dan Case

Candidates Sought for Church Council

Nominations are invited for several St. Paul Church Council positions as our congregation looks to its annual meeting and election on January 17, 2021. Council positions open for nomination include second vice president, secretary, elder, deacon, and trustee. All positions are for three year terms. The nominee elected for second vice president thereafter serves as first vice president during the second year and as Council president during a third and final year of office. Church elder Barbara Schultz has already indicated her willingness to continue for a second term in her role. Also, Beverly Gunther is being nominated to serve as St. Paul Council secretary. All Council members attend monthly meetings on the second Tuesday of every month, as well as assume other duties on Sunday mornings and other occasions. Nominations will be submitted to a vote of the congregation at the annual meeting on Sunday, **January 17, 2021**. Elected Council members will be welcomed at an all-Council dinner that same evening and installed to their respective offices during Sunday morning services on January 21.

Any church member interested in being nominated should contact the church office or speak with Church trustees Dave Badarak, Michael Isaacs, and Toni Hill.

JOYS AND CONCERNS

Our deepest condolences to David and Elaine Cowper and family on the passing of their grandson, Grant Finch.

WE ASK FOR YOUR PRAYERS FOR

Church Members and Friends: Darlene Babin, Liz Bechtol, Kirk Blanchard, Marion Bolen, Debbie Case, John Caufield, Margo Charette, Doris Hilliker, Ollie Hilliker, Lyn Hogan, Wyatt Hribik, Wayne Jones, Gerri Lynn King, George Koster, Yvonne Koster, Arnold Knofske, Nora Kronemann, Loretta Kurtzel, Maggie Hall, Neil McEachern, Jim Nault, Judy Nieman, Shirleen Powell, Morgan Schalm, Sheryl Schwab, Bev Sitz, Sue Spears, Diane Sturgeon, Helen St. Louis, Doreen Thompson, and Bert Thompson.

Extended Family: Dawn Sturgeon Anderson, Kim Arndt (daughter, Pauline Arndt), Paul Bachran (Leonard), Marcie Bolen (daughter, Ron & Marion Bolen), Talama Braba (Judy Albright's daughter), Cassidey Wangbickler-Congelierre, Mary Jane Fliss (sister-in-law, Arlene Wolfram), Gabriella Gomez (niece, Darlene Babin), Richard Jantzsen (son, Ann Anderson), Kevin & Steven Johnson (grandsons, Patricia Olson) Richard Jones, Joanne LeFleur (daughter, Helene & Neil McEachern), Jennifer & Tammy Lee (granddaughter & daughter, Barb Siemers), Courtney McEachern Matthews, Kim McEachern (daughters-in-law, Helene & Neil McEachern), Toni Oliver, Judy Robin (aunt, Lucinda Chavez), Trudy Clark-Schiller (daughter, April & Steve Clark), Darlene Wangbickler (sister, Grace Wangbickler), Nicholas Surre (great-grandson, Helene McEachern), and Victoria Whitcher (daughter, Cheryl Stewart).

Congregations' Parents: Robert & Diane Brainard (parents, Ed Brainard), Jan Filpus (mother, Julia-Joy Miller), and Carol Hoffman (mother, Tracy Hoffman).

Church Members & Friends in Nursing or Rehab Care:

Donald Babin - Carolyn's Corner, 17890 Parkridge Dr., Riverview, 48193; Mary Dubke - hospice - Amy's Place, 41346 Llorac Lane, Northville 48167; Terry Dyer - Heartland Healthcare Center, 9150 Allen Rd., Allen Park, 48101; Lindley Hogan - Applewood Nursing Center, 18500 Van Horn Road, Woodhaven, 48183; Shirley Koths - Heartland Nursing Center, 9150 Allen Rd., Allen Park 48101, Esther Perry - Bellbrook Assisted Living, 873 West Avon Rd., Unit 209 H, Rochester Hills, 48307; Eleanor Rossi - Maple Heights, 4600 Allen Rd, Room 415, Allen Park, 48101; Melissa Rossi -17652 Colgate, Dearborn Heights, 48125.

LET US ALSO KEEP IN PRAYER THOSE PROVIDING EMERGENCY 'FRONTLINE' SERVICES as police officers, nurses, and EMS workers during the ongoing pandemic. We want to especially remember church members and friends Tricia Nault, Kim Arndt, Wendi Wioncek Ashby, Rick Barnosky, Jennifer Babin, Rhonda Wioncek Berndt, Dana Wioncek Barlage, Chelsey Eisenga, Joshua Eisenga, James Hubert, Debbie Lyles, Amy McGahey, Jarod MacZink, Ciera Mack, Marci Magnuson, Sam Martin, Lexi Mellin, Michelle Mellin, Brenda Murphy, Inez Kurtzel Ogonowski, Amber Ostrowski, Rebecca Ostrowski, Samantha Pedersen, Eric Poet, Trudy Clark Schiller, Rachel Tank, Emily Wangbickler Baggett, Jillian Wangbickler, and Sarah Wangbickler.

"OUR PILGRIM JOURNEY," A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, November 22, 2020

This past week I attended a zoom meeting of a community advisory board for one of our local hospital systems. Most of the meeting was focused on how area hospitals were meeting the challenge of medical care in a time of pandemic. The word was good—and bad.

The good news is that mortality rates for Covid-19 patients are down from earlier this year. Fewer people with Covid-19 have died. This may be due to better, more informed treatment, born of now-considerable experience. Yet there is also some speculation among medical people that the four different strains of Covid-19 found right now in Michigan may have mutated and thus might be somewhat less lethal than before. In other words, our four strains out of many more found worldwide might not be as life-threatening across the board as we saw last spring or even as other states are still experiencing. The bad news is that there could be a "monster wave" ahead of us, exposing more people who are truly vulnerable because of age or health conditions, even if our Covid-19 strains aren't quite as bad.

Those of the words of the medical people. Just over the last several weeks, the local hospitals have seen almost a tripling of Covid-19 cases. It seems likely to build. The hospitals in many communities across Michigan could end up completely overwhelmed. It's not just a matter of space but also staffing. Who's going to take care of all the patients who arrive at the hospital for treatment?

Anyone who is hospitalized with Covid-19 has to be carefully monitored because patients have been known to take a sudden, drastic turn for the worse. This is what has motivated our governor to announce the steps she has to restrict gatherings in public and private places. This is why she and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services are imploring everyone to wear masks and even limit family gatherings this Thanksgiving. This is why our own congregation, which takes the health of all members seriously, has also suspended on-site worship and programs for the next three weeks. Our own hope is that if we and others act responsibly now we will be able to worship together come Christmas, which is little more than a month away.

Some Thanksgiving, eh? It's certainly going to be different as we pull back and take the precautions that are so important and necessary. At the same time, there's no reason why we can't continue to give thanks. In fact, gratitude can be a valuable attitude to help us get through a time like this. If anything, the sacrifices we make should make us more thankful for what we had in healthier times and simply took for granted.

For here and now, we can also be grateful for those tender mercies God continues to bestow—good health if we've kept it and the resources to battle Covid-19 through both treatment and already pending vaccines. Not to be discounted either are the opportunities afforded by technology to help us stay in touch and connected with people we love even when we have to physically isolate ourselves. A phone call or zoom call or Facebooking may not be as sweet as being together in person, giving each other handshakes, high fives, and hugs. But it's not nothing. Yes, I'm all the more grateful for what I have and am privileged to still enjoy even under our more difficult circumstances.

If you know your history, you know that this whole Thanksgiving holiday is about giving thanks in the face of adversity. President Abraham Lincoln first made Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863 in the depths of the American Civil War, right after the bloody Battle of Gettysburg when our land was still sundered by terrible

conflict. But the holiday has its deeper roots in the celebration of a Pilgrim community, despite their many troubles, which were far more formidable and daunting than our own.

Originally known as Separatists because of their decision to separate out from the Church of England a hundred years after the Protestant Reformation, the so-called Pilgrims faced acute discrimination in England for their religious beliefs which were viewed as a threat to the king's government and national stability. Consequently, the Pilgrims decided to emigrate to nearby Holland across the English Channel where they were assured of religious freedom as the reformed Christians they were.

However, most of the Pilgrims, who were farmers back in England, had trouble finding jobs in the Dutch City of Leiden which welcomed them. Moreover, they soon felt that their kids were being corrupted by the overly free-and-easy ways of the Dutch. This prompted a group decision to up-end their lives all over again in order to seek religious freedom and economic opportunity for themselves on North American shores.

Since none of the Pilgrims were well-to-do, they made a bargain with a group of English investors who were willing to finance their move and resettlement in exchange for future payoff, based on anticipated profits from farming and fur-trapping. Those English investors were not especially generous. Returning to England for just a brief layover the Pilgrims found themselves climbing aboard two old weather-beaten ships, setting sail from Plymouth, England.

One of the boats, most ironically called the Speedwell, was completely unseaworthy. It spouted so many leaks that, after just a couple of days out, it had returned to port. The second ship, famous to us as the Mayflower, also headed back to port until the Pilgrim community figured out what to do next. In the end, just about all the Pilgrims crowded onto the Mayflower, resuming the crossing to America two months later than originally planned—in September, rather than July. With rough seas, poor food, and crowded conditions the Mayflower passage was harrowing. Although a baby was born, there were a couple of deaths too, with the bodies cast into the sea. Once the Pilgrims actually arrived in the Cape Cod Bay, two more died because of illness and accident. Sad to say, it was an omen for what was to come.

Of course, the Pilgrims' extended delay because of the leaking Speedwell meant a later seasonal landing for the Mayflower. They pulled into Massachusetts Bay in the latter days of November when everything was already turning bitterly cold. Although once ashore the Pilgrims were able to build a few structures to house their numbers for the winter months ahead, it was all pretty crude. Moreover, what was erected amounted to common dormitory and dining spaces without much privacy or opportunities for what we today call "social distancing." This proved to be lethal or deadly when disease broke out. The cold, inadequate nutrition, and limited or non-existence medical care, combined with the rude housing conditions, created a death spiral.

Consider this. When the Pilgrims first landed and started their new settlement at Plymouth, Massachusetts there 102 men, women, and children in all. By winter's end, five months later, only 53 survived. Half the community was gone. For women it was worse. Of the 18 women who came ashore, only four were still alive by the next year. Everyone still living was close to the point of starvation. All were malnourished.

Can you imagine the terrible grief that was felt? Yet, remarkably, the Pilgrim community did not give up. Instead, they persevered through the year that followed, including another bitter winter. It was a couple of years before they celebrated the thanksgiving event that we recall.

In the Pilgrims' need, help came from God, who gave them courage. Yet four months after their arrival there was also assistance from an unexpected but providential source—the local native Americans. Among them were Samoset and Squanto, two native Americans who had already mastered the English language because of earlier contact with English fishermen plying local waters. This made them both invaluable translators as the Pilgrims met up with the local Pokanoket tribe.

Thereafter, the small, peaceable Pilgrim community was able to forge a close working relationship with the Pokanoket tribe, which offered advice on navigating the local habitat. That included hunting, fishing, and agriculture. In turn, tribal members received benefits from trading, plus exposure to European know-how.

It would be a mistake to idealize, let alone glorify, the Pilgrims more than they have already been. Yet they were a community who had their virtues. Unlike the somewhat sterner Puritans that subsequently followed them to New England, the Pilgrims had a better reputation for tolerance, even though they held their own Protestant Christian convictions firmly.

While still on Mayflower, before coming ashore, the Pilgrim community drafted a compact or covenant agreement which they asked all men aboard to sign. Signatories affirmed their mutual commitment to walk together in the ways of the Lord and to respect whatever the laws the community together needed to establish to maintain peace and civility. They knew how destructive conflict can be particularly when we find ourselves in unchartered territory and human egos take over.

The Mayflower Compact was signed and sealed on November 21, 1620. It not only set an example for future American generations organizing our nation but also provided a model for our own brand of Christian churches. In fact, the United Church of Christ with its congregational model of governance traces much of its origins to the original Pilgrim community. We can fairly count the Pilgrims as some of our direct spiritual ancestors. The original church they founded at Plymouth is today one of fellow UCC congregations.

Significantly, because no ordained minister had the good health or fortitude to join them in the move to America, the Pilgrim community was completely lay-led. Individual members of the Pilgrim church organized at Plymouth preached the Word. Afterwards, the lay preacher would step down from the pulpit and the congregation would begin asking questions about what had just been preached. Underscored was the importance of accountability for what we say, especially in God's name.

The Pilgrims also believed in the value of dialogue—not only between us and God but also between and amongst ourselves, as children of God, striving to be faithful. As their ordained pastor, John Robinson, said to them in Holland before they set forth to North America, "The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word." Quite similarly, the motto of our present-day United Church proclaims that "God is still speaking."

In keeping with our Pilgrim inheritance, our congregational style of ministry continues to be highly conversational. Friends, I hope you know that I am always listening to what you have to say in matters of faith because no single person has a monopoly on God's truth and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

I deeply appreciate the humility of the Pilgrim people who didn't have much patience for boasting. No less admirable is the fact that they didn't believe in grasping this life too tightly. They had a keen sense that we are all just passing through this world. Their goal was the kingdom of God. Accordingly, they wanted to live their lives in a way that both honored God and prepared them for an ultimate reunion with him.

The very name "Pilgrim" by which the whole Plymouth community is today remembered was actually adopted later, rather than earlier. It was a name given them in retrospect by their governor, William Bradford, when he set about writing their history. But it was a name that fit and a name that stuck because the whole community was inspired by the story of the Patriarch Abraham setting out from ancient Ur in quest of a Promised Land (Genesis 12:1). They also identified with the words of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews where it speaks of the faithful as "strangers and pilgrims on earth." (Hebrews 11:7-15)

Congregation, think deeply about those words: "strangers and pilgrims on earth." Ultimately, because the Pilgrim fathers and mothers took such words of scripture to heart and appreciated that mortal life is transient they knew better than to be greedy and grasping with things of this world. As a fruit of this wisdom and this spirit, they were more modest and thankful, despite the immense hardships and losses they had to endure.

As Christians, as much as we respect the value of human life and do our best to always uphold it in real and sincere ways, we could all stand to be a little less worldly, reminded that this earth is not our ultimate destination, spiritually speaking. If we stand less worldly on this earth, we gain the spiritual capacity to be more thankful too—as we should be

The Pilgrims believed in a "provident" God—a God who provides. They had it rough. I suspect rougher and tougher than most of us do. They could have become obsessed and forlorn over their devastating losses. But they chose to look for God's abiding blessing upon the dead and his outreached blessing to the living. Yes, in their faith those Pilgrims still offer a good example for us all. As they saw it, the fact that half of them survived under the conditions of that first Plymouth winter was its own miracle and a cause for gratitude.

Congregation, this coming Thanksgiving, everything is so different. But we can still do one thing the same—maybe even better and more sincerely. We can give God our thanks—thanks for what we've enjoyed before; thanks for what we'll enjoy when times turn better, and, yes, thanks for the blessings bestowed through God's grace, right here and now. Let's give thanks for what health we do have, the family that cares about us whether we're together or apart, and for a nation that, despite all its struggles and discontents at the moment, remains a good place to live, where freedom of faith is possible and a concern for what right, just, and loving remains lively.

Ultimately, when we're thankful people, God has a way of multiplying our blessings—yes, just as he did with Jesus who fed a multitude with merely two fish and five barley loaves and found plenty left over. (John 6:8-14) May we each find comfort, strength, and hope in giving thanks to God, putting our trust always in his abounding grace. Amen