

THE NEW CITY JOURNAL

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THE SEASON OF LENT

BY KEITH SCHERER

The season of Lent is upon us! Much like Advent prepared us for the celebration of Christmas, Lent is intended to prepare us for our Easter celebration. What was the **Cycle of Light** (where we remembered the light of Christ coming into the world) will now be the **Cycle of Life** (where we will remember the life that Christ gives to us through His life, His death, and ultimately His resurrection).

Alexander Schmemmann, an Eastern Orthodox priest said this in his book *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (*Pascha is another name for Easter*):

As we make the first step into the "bright sadness" of Lent, we see—far, far away—the destination. It is the joy of Easter, it is the entrance into the glory of the Kingdom. And it is this vision, the foretaste of Easter, that makes Lent's sadness bright and our lenten effort a "spiritual spring." The night may be dark and long, but all along the way a mysterious and radiant dawn seems to shine on the horizon.

Lent at FPC in 2024

This preparatory season is 40 days long, not counting Sundays. Counting backwards this year from Easter we arrive at Wednesday, February 14, **Ash Wednesday**. Our Lenten journey begins with services at noon and 7:00 pm. We start with a remembrance of who we are and who God is:

*Remember, O man, remember O woman,
remember O child
that you are dust and to dust you shall
return,
but the steadfast love of the Lord is from
everlasting to everlasting.*

From this place we enter a season of **Weekly Worship for Lent**, a **Lenten Devotional Guide** (ready on Sunday, February 11), and **Lenten Soup Suppers** on Wednesdays from 6:00–7:30 pm. Like last year, the soup suppers will be a chance for us to gather in fellowship as the people of God and to prepare for the upcoming Lenten sermons.

Our Lenten church calendar culminates in **Holy Week**, an even more intense preparation for Easter. Sunday, March 24 is **Passion and Palm Sunday**. Our **Holy Week Breakfasts** will be on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday at 9:00 am (note that there will only be one breakfast each day). Our **Maundy Thursday** and **Good Friday Services** will both be at 7:00 pm. **Holy Saturday** is for your quiet reflection. And then? **Easter Sunday**, March 31, is a glorious celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

An Invitation to Engage

All of those calendar things listed above are not just about **doing church**. Rather, they are to help us **be church!** When we engage, when we bring our whole selves to each of these experiences, we, as the people of God, have the opportunity to meet Jesus, to be with our Lord. And THAT is the place of true transformation!

Along with those times that we gather together as the people of God during Lent, we also have opportunity as individuals to lean into Lent. Some choose to give up something for Lent. The purpose is to be a reminder, when feeling the loss of that thing, of what Jesus gave up for us

and our salvation. (Note: Sundays are “in” Lent but are not actually Lent. They are always feast days and a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. It’s possible to partake in what you gave up for Lent and still remain in the spirit of Lent.)

However, I have found that my Lenten experiences have been far richer when I focus on taking something on rather than giving something up. Using the **Advent Devotional Guide** mentioned above will be a great place to do so.

You might also want to lean into one or more of the traditional spiritual practices associated with Lent: **Prayer**, **Fasting**, and **Almsgiving**. **Prayer** is simply dialogue with God: Father, Son, and Spirit. Set aside time for your relationship. You might also want to explore praying with Scripture, especially the Psalms. **Fasting** is an extension of prayer and is a form of giving up something for Lent. When you feel the pangs of hunger or loss, use that as an invitation to pray. **Almsgiving** moves from fasting and its denial of self to giving to and focusing on others. These three traditional Lenten practices move us to the fruit of outward loving that is motivated by the love of God that we have received.

THE Lenten Prayer

Ephrem the Syrian was a 4th century hymnist who wrote what Alexander Schmemmann has called *the Lenten prayer*. As I did 3 years ago, I leave it with you (with updated language) for your use and edification this season.

*Take from me the spirit of sloth,
faint-heartedness, lust of power,
and idle talk
but give rather the spirit of chastity
humility, patience, and love to Your
servant.*

*Yea, O Lord and King,
grant me to see my own error
and not to judge my brother
for You are blessed unto ages of ages.*

Amen.

STORIES FROM THE MISSION FIELD: DAN MCNERNEY, FRONTIER FELLOWSHIP



About Frontier Fellowship:

Frontier Fellowship invites believing communities to engage people groups where the Good News of Jesus and His Kingdom is not yet known.

Every People

Of the 8 billion people alive today, more than two billion have never heard of Jesus. That reality compels us to engage the world's least-reached places, supporting efforts to establish local churches that can proclaim the Good News of God's Kingdom to their communities and beyond. We long to see all people, from every distinct group on earth, encounter the grace of God and become thriving expressions of the Body of Christ in their unique contexts.

Every Church

We believe God gives His Church the privilege of creating avenues of access between the message of the Gospel and those who haven't had an opportunity to hear it. It's not a calling reserved for "specialists"—it's an invitation to ordinary people entrusted with the most extraordinary message. That's why we're committed to uplifting the faithfulness and unity of congregations worldwide to serve as wellsprings of mission initiative.

Words from Dan McNerney in his January 2024 Newsletter:

I have spent the last 22 years of my life supporting the work of Christians in the Middle East. In many cases Christians in the Middle East are a persecuted minority in need of great encouragement and support from the global church. In another sense they are some of the most dynamic, grace-filled followers of Christ I have ever known. They are bringing a new vitality to the global church, especially in the West where in many places the church is teetering dangerously. These Arab and Persian friends of mine are praying fervently for the Jewish and Muslim people in the Middle East to find Christ as their Lord and Savior, and thereby find peace for themselves and each other.

Peace is principally a matter of the heart. Most often, we need to find peace within ourselves before we can begin to find peace with others. Peace and strength come from grace: and there is no greater grace to be found than in Jesus Christ. Grace demands that we depart from believing we must deliver an "eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." It is only through God's grace and power that senseless cycles of violence can be broken.

I leave with you for all of us to remember one of the greatest benedictions ever written by the Apostle Paul: "See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to do good to each other and to all people. Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:15-18)



A VIEW ON SOUP SUPPER & SCRIPTURE

Last year, I attended some of the Soup Supper and Scripture Wednesdays here. These events started as an idea around our staff table to foster community and to provide a place for people to experience what New City Community Groups do each week. We even asked our New City Community Groups to host them!

As Keith mentioned in his front page article, we are resuming Soup Supper and Scripture! I hope you can join us as we lean into the scriptures, studying God's word together. Come on Wednesday Nights during Lent (excluding Holy Week) from 6:00–7:30 pm in Graham Hall.

We wanted to give people space to experience the sermon texts and talk together about what it

means for us. Last year, we had roughly 50–60 each night who joined us around tables, eating soup, enjoying fellowship, and talking about scripture.

This event is meant for the whole family! Bring your kids, and invite friends and family to join us. We will start out with soup as a full group then break out into smaller groups. If you have any teens who would like to participate, please encourage them to join us in our group discussions around tables.

Let's lean into the season of Lent and enjoy some great food while doing it!

~ Melissa Beneke

FAITH FORMATION: SINGING HYMNS

I am ecstatic to announce that The Gospel Story Hymnal is finally here! Lindsey Goetz and I have compiled and produced this hymnal over the last five years. We are so grateful to you, our church family, for the encouragement and support you've given us at every step, and we will let you know soon when you can celebrate with us at the book's launch party!

But first, a quick note on why we started this project—why we think it's important for all ages to learn and sing these songs of the faith:

1. Hymns focus us on God and his story.
2. Hymns teach us Christian theology.
3. Hymns help us remember, filling our hearts and minds with the truth of the gospel.
4. Hymns connect us to a long history of church and worship.
5. Hymns give expression to a broad spectrum of human experience and emotion.

Because all of these things are true, we wanted to make these hymns accessible and attractive to a younger generation—hence, The Gospel Story Hymnal. We have placed these hymnals in our church pews to show children that they belong, and help them to more fully engage and participate as part of our worshiping body.

We pray these hymnals will inspire a renewed



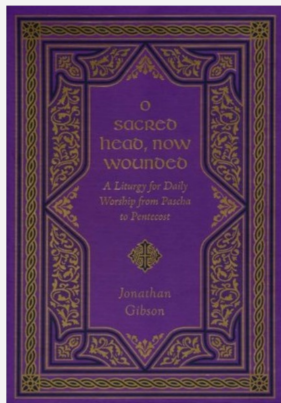
zeal and growth in you, too. If you grew up with hymns, revisit your favorites. If not, find a new one! When you get the “This Week at First Pres” email, open the Bulletin link to see what songs we'll be singing on Sunday, and take some time to read and pray through the words ahead of time, or listen to the songs online. Spend time singing the truth of the gospel, and reacquainting yourself with the love of God. Remember that you are part of his story, and part of his family.

Note—If you pre-ordered a hymnal last year, it should be ready to pick up in the church office. If you would like to purchase a copy, talk to Britta directly or order online at wordandwonder.org.

~ Britta Wallbaum

BOOK OF THE MONTH

Jonathan Gibson, *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded: A Liturgy for Daily Worship from Pascha to Pentecost* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2024).



As we approach the season of Lent, some of you will be looking for resources to help you grow during that time of meditation on our need for a Redeemer. Let me recommend Jonathan Gibson's new liturgy for daily worship for the season of Lent! This book includes a full-text order of private or family prayer and worship for every day of Lent and Holy Week, along with orders of prayer and worship for Easter, Ascension Sunday, and Pentecost; it also includes a strong Bible reading plan. It is doctrinally rich, deeply humbling, and warmly edifying. The best tools of the church serve to give us both the light and heat of the gospel, and this Lenten liturgy certainly succeeds!

~ Pastor David Goetz

STEWARDSHIP REPORT

Average Weekly Need: \$ 14,239.00

Received December 3, 2023 \$ 11,904.00

Total Attendance 228

Received December 10, 2023 \$ 5,812.46

Total Attendance 209

Received December 17, 2023 \$ 22,185.00

Total Attendance 281

Received December 24, 2023 \$ 17,269.00

Total Attendance 203

Received December 31, 2023 \$ 58,298.30

Total Attendance 307

**Total includes online. Average online worship: 59*

Financial Report - December 2023

Actual income/expenses for year to date, including surplus funds of \$28,276, and "Faith Giving above Pledges" of \$152,280.

Income	\$ 384,308.44
Expenses	<u>\$ 366,096.02</u>
Net Surplus	\$ 18,212.42

MEDIA OF THE MONTH

This podcast, "Ask NT Wright Anything," was my driving companion during much of this fall. The podcast is in interview format between the host and well known New



Testament scholar and theologian and former bishop of Durham N.T. Wright or Tom Wright. I found this podcast both intellectually stimulating and spiritually encouraging. The interview questions all come from listeners and were curated around a particular topic or theme for each episode. I appreciated the interesting, candid, and sometimes difficult questions listeners submitted and appreciated Tom's authentic, insightful and pastoral responses. I always came away feeling I had learned something and was motivated to dive deeper and continue these discussions with others. Although I may not completely agree on all his particular views, I appreciated his gracious and humble approach to seeking truth for the sake of growing in our knowledge of and love for Jesus.

~ Elizabeth Kapitaniuk

DATES TO REMEMBER

Session Meeting	Feb.	6
Prolife Prayer	Feb.	7
Pray at Planned Parenthood	Feb.	9
Family Get Together	Feb.	10
Youth Group—Super Bowl Party	Feb.	11
Deacon Meeting	Feb.	13
Ash Wednesday Services 12 & 7	Feb.	14
Communion Sunday & Homebound Communion	Feb.	18
Friendship Bible Club	Feb.	18
Choir Starts	Feb.	18
Soup Supper & Scripture	Feb.	21/28
Communicants Retreat	Feb.	23-24
Communion Sunday	Feb.	25

SESSION MINUTES

Highlights from the January 9, 2024 Session Meeting are:

REPORT OF THE CLERK: KATHY RUSSELL, CLERK PRO TEM

- Minutes of the December 19, 2023, Session Meeting were e-mailed in advance. A motion was made, seconded, and passed unanimously as corrected.

RIVERS & LAKES PRESBYTERY MEETING: DAVID GOETZ, ASSOCIATE PASTOR

- The next Rivers & Lakes Presbytery Meeting is January 26-27, 2024, at First Presbyterian Church, Waukegan, IL. Kelli Marks will attend both days and Anne Miller will attend on Friday.

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS: DALE ROBERTS FOR DAN WEGEHAUPT

- Dale Roberts reviewed the Worship Attendance - Offering Statistics Report (dated 1/3/24) for the last six months of the year and shared that the church is in a good financial position.

TRANSITIONAL PASTOR: JAMES KINNARD, INTERIM ADMINISTRATIVE TASK FORCE CHAIR

- James provided a brief update on the Transitional Pastor process and the Session Zoomed with a candidate offered by Interim Pastor Ministries (IPM). After the zoom meeting, Session members offered thoughts and reactions. All were favorably impressed and agreed that we should move forward checking references. There was consensus that IATF should continue its due diligence by checking references, reconnecting with IPM, and begin exploring options for housing.

OLD BUSINESS: PASTOR DAVID GOETZ

- By-Laws. David indicated that the By-Laws documents had been officially updated.
- Lenten Soup-Suppers and Lenten Holy Week Breakfasts (M/T/W) were discussed.
- Shepherding: Pastor David indicated that he is in the process of contacting every household in the congregation.

~ Kathy Russell, Clerk Pro-Tem

SPECIAL CONGREGATIONAL MEETING MINUTES—JANUARY 14, 2024

TE Goetz re-stated the purpose of the meeting—to ask the congregation's concurrence with TE Jeffrey Moore's "request for dissolution of the pastoral relationship" (BOG 14-1 B). TE Goetz read aloud from BOG 14-1, sections A and B, to clarify the nature of the congregational action to be taken; he then recounted the steps taken in the last few months whereby TE Moore discerned the Lord's call in the call of Lebanon Presbyterian Church (OH).

TE Goetz then asked for a motion to approve the dissolution of TE Jeffrey Moore's call to First Presbyterian Church of Aurora. RE Dale Roberts made the motion and RE Kathy Russell seconded.

TE Goetz opened the floor for questions or discussion. TE Goetz put the motion to the congregation for a vote: those gathered were unanimous in voting to approve the motion.

~ Anne Miller, Clerk of Session

SPECIAL NEWS

Momentous Wedding Anniversaries:

- Tom and Bette Harris married 2/3/1961.

ADMINISTRATIVE NOTES

2024 PMA Update

Because we have received questions recently about PMA, I am repeating some details of Per Member Asking that were shared a while back. In the past, these amounts have been asked by our national General Assembly and local Presbytery as a “per member” straight dollar amount. You may guess, and would be correct, that these funds are used for similar types of ministries as we use our budget for at First Pres. As of this year, these amounts are based on a percentage of a congregations’ total giving received.

For several years this amount has been at \$40.00 per person. With the size and the giving of our congregation, this new method comes to a slightly higher contribution than in the past. In an attempt to simplify this for our members, we will continue to treat this as a Per Member Asking, with a new, though slight, increase to \$45.00 per member as follows:

General Assembly – EPC	\$22.50
<u>Rivers and Lakes Presbytery</u>	<u>\$22.50</u>
Total	\$45.00

Alternatively, some have been known to give more than the suggested PMA amount to help fund our congregational contribution to the work of the national church. Whatever the amount you can give, it is much appreciated! The session has deemed for many years we will meet these requested amounts as a congregation whether or not we fully receive them.

~ Dan Wegehaupt

LAST WORD FROM PASTOR KAREN

Lately I have been reflecting on the joy of being part of the Body of Christ. I sense this especially as our congregation observes the Sacrament of Communion. As Christ ministers to each one of us individually, Christ ministers to us as His Body gathered at this particular place and time. My heart is filled with gratitude for each person as they come forward to receive the bread and the cup. Some are brothers and sisters who have known each other for a long time. Others have come more recently. Some are young. Some are senior saints. Some come as families bringing the youngest among us to receive a blessing. Some come individually. All are part of God’s family gathered in worship.

The Bible is filled with “one another” passages that speak to who we are as God’s people and how we are to live in unity with Christ and one another. The phrase “one another” is used 100 times in 94 New

Testament verses. 47 of those verses give instructions to followers of Jesus. Paul wrote 60 % of those “one another” commands. (<https://overviewbible.com/one-another-infographic/>).

One third of the “one another” commands deal with the church getting along. We are to be at “peace with one another” (Mk 9:50) and “Be of the same mind with one another.” (Ro 12:6). One third of one another passages instruct Christians to love one another. We are commanded to “love one another” (Jn 13:34) “serve one another” (Gal 5:13) and “be devoted to one another in love” (Ro 12:10).

So, my “last word” this month is to rejoice and give thanks for the joy of being part of the Body of Christ. As you rejoice, spend time noticing who is missing too! Start praying for someone you could invite to be part of the Body of Christ at 4th and Downer.

YOUTH WINTER RETREAT

On Friday, January 26, we had a group of 15 people travel up to Lake Geneva to spend the weekend together at Covenant Harbor. Our youth ministry has retreated to Covenant Harbor for about ten years, and each time our teenagers love the extra time together and come back refreshed and excited about glorifying God with their lives. This year included our middle school and high school students, and everyone was pumped to go!

We stayed in the Lodge (right off the dining hall, which is ideal) and spent lots of time late into the night playing games, looking for clues as part of the camp game, telling jokes, and eating unhealthy snacks. We weren't quiet, but we also didn't have to worry about bothering anyone else because we had the building to ourselves.

The teaching for the weekend focused on a particular theme: movement. The teacher for the weekend highlighted God's movement into our world in Jesus, Christ's own calling of Peter and his feeding of the five thousand, and our own calling from God to move towards others as Christ's ambassadors. We got to share stories on Saturday night about how we've seen God move in our own lives—how we've seen him meet our needs, direct our steps, and deepen our dependence on him. Our students also seemed to enjoy the band that led us all weekend. Ask your kids if they had any favorite songs! We'll see what fruit our Lord produces through the teaching, the singing, the opportunity to reflect in Covenant Harbor's "sacred spaces," and the time to be with one another.



I would be remiss if I failed to mention all the other fun we got to have: the polar plunge (almost all of our students jumped into freezing Lake Geneva!), the rock-climbing wall, basketball and volleyball, stumpball, and much more! Even though there wasn't a lot of snow on the ground, we found plenty to do. On Friday night our church won the trivia contest: we divided into three groups and actually took first, second, and third place! On Saturday morning we became the first team to complete the robot challenge (ask the students). On Saturday evening our church won the outdoor stumpball game. And on Sunday morning we found out that our church won the all-camp game! Our students were competitive, and they were happy to win, but they were also kind towards the other churches represented. In fact, several other adults approached me during the weekend to comment on how kind our students were to other kids and how respectful they were to the adults.

Several of our students commented, after getting back, that they feel closer as a group after a retreat. I rejoice in that! And I look forward to seeing how our Lord continues to work in their lives to knit their hearts together and to instruct them in the path of life.

~ Pastor David Goetz

