



# The Scroll

ADVENT 2024

**St. Stephen's**   
*United Methodist Church*  
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# Spencer's Spot

## The Journey to Bethlehem

Advent is a season of journeys. From ancient times to today, the story of Christmas has been one of movement—of drawing closer to the promise of God's presence. It invites us to consider our own inward journeys, accompanied by four companions: longing, waiting, simplicity, and humility.

### **Longing: A Place of Deep Desire**

Long before Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem, God's people lived with longing. They yearned for a Messiah to bring peace and renewal. Their prayers, spoken in faith over generations, echoed the cry of the psalmist: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:3).

We know longing too. It touches our lives in different ways—longing for healing, for reconciliation, or for peace in a divided world.

Advent teaches us that our longing is sacred. It is not something to escape or dismiss, but to carry with us to the manger, trusting that Christ's coming meets our deepest needs in ways we may not yet see.

### **Waiting: A Place of Trust**

If longing stirs the heart, waiting tests the soul. The Christmas story is steeped in waiting. Mary waited for the child she carried to be born. Joseph waited for his next steps to be revealed in dreams. Shepherds and magi alike waited, looking for signs in the heavens.

Advent reminds us that waiting is not wasted time. It is sacred space, a chance to grow in trust as we lean on God's promises. Whatever waiting looks like in your life this season—whether for clarity, healing, or strength—know that God is present, working in the silence to renew and sustain you.

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### **Simplicity: A Place of Quiet Faith**

Bethlehem was not a bustling city; it was a quiet town, unassuming and simple. Christ's birth came not with royal splendor but in a humble stable. This simplicity challenges us in a season often consumed by busyness.

What might it look like to rediscover simplicity this Advent? It could mean making space for prayer in the midst of preparation or cherishing a single meaningful tradition instead of rushing through many. In the quiet moments, we are better able to see what Advent reveals: the profound truth of Emmanuel—God with us.

### **Humility: A Place of Surrender**

At the heart of the Christmas story is humility—God taking on flesh to dwell among us. Mary's simple yet courageous words, "Let it be to me according to your word," reflect the surrender of her heart to God's

plan. The shepherds' awe and the magi's bowing remind us that true humility recognizes the holy, even in unexpected places.

Advent calls us to this same humility, not as self-lowering but as an opening of our hearts to God. It is in this space of surrender that we can say, "Here I am, Lord," trusting that His plans are good, even when they feel uncertain.

### **Walking Together to Bethlehem**

At St. Stephen's, we recognize that we each come to Advent from different places. Some of us carry joy and excitement; others bring weariness or grief. Wherever you find yourself, you are welcome here. Together, we will journey to Bethlehem, trusting in the light of Christ to guide our way.

May this season of longing, waiting, simplicity, and humility prepare your heart to receive the gift of Emmanuel—God with us.

Peace and grace to you,

Spencer

P.S. From our entire family, we hope that you have a blessed Advent, a joyous Christmas, and a hopeful New Year. *Spencer, Lori, Gavyn, and Morgan Broce*



# What is Our Calling?

This reflection continues from my Advent sermon “Rome: A Place of Longing” on Romans 8:18-25 (December 1, 2024), based on the first chapter of Rob Fuquay’s *On the Way to Bethlehem*.

When I began my appointment at St. Stephen’s United Methodist Church in 2022, I learned about the impact of the 2016 General Conference’s decision on this congregation. The decision to uphold the incompatibility clause—which prohibits the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals and same-sex marriage within the church—exposed deep divisions across theological, cultural, and geographical lines within our global denomination, and it did the same within St. Stephen’s UMC.

Since then, this congregation has engaged in countless meetings, discussions, and surveys, wrestling with the ongoing struggle to balance unity with theological diversity. I’ve been told that individuals across varying theological perspectives left the church on this struggle, carrying with them deep hurt, frustration, and disappointment.

I’ve also witnessed the church’s ongoing struggle firsthand as we navigated the news of disaffiliations in 2023 and the General Conference held in 2024, which resulted in many traditional churches leaving the denomination and the removal of the incompatibility clause. Through it all, we have continued to wrestle faithfully with what it means to be

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# Manger Ministry

In keeping with what our church has done for the last nine years, St. Stephens UMC is dedicating its Christmas Eve offering to provide families in our community with a safe and stable home. We call this our Manger Ministry, celebrating the birth of Jesus in a manger, the only place available to his family on the night of his birth.

With the funds raised through the Manger Ministry, St. Stephens partners with a local non-profit organization, Homestretch, to cover the yearly costs of providing a home for Homestretch families as they go through a highly effective two-year program. The program empowers families to move from crisis to long-term stability and financial independence. During their time with Homestretch, parents work at a job, pay a portion of their living expenses, and are required to improve career, parenting, educational, and financial skills.



Over the years, the families St. Stephens has helped have successfully graduated from Homestretch with new jobs, affordable and stable housing, and a deep and sincere appreciation of the tremendous support our church has provided to them. This year, because of the kindness and generosity of our congregation, we are providing homes for three Homestretch families, each with single mothers, and a total of eight children, all under the age of 11.



St. Stephens members have given generously out of their love for God, and in celebration of the birth of Jesus on Christmas. Please consider donating to the Manger Ministry by using an envelope provided for the offering on Christmas Eve, or by providing a donation to St. Stephens marked for Manger Ministry if you unable to attend a service on Christmas Eve.

If you have any questions about the Manger Ministry or our church's work with Homestretch, please reach out to Jeanne Sclater at 703-323-9690 or Linda Stephens at (703) 582-0956.

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a church embracing theological diversity. Yet, we have also heard voices calling for an end to this discussion—urging a swift decree, believing that continuing the conversation only exacerbated the harm within our congregation.

As I reflected on Romans 8 in preparation for my sermon, I was reminded of these ongoing sufferings—struggles that feel like unending labor pains. Labor pains are body-damaging, body-altering, life-

giving, and ultimately life-transforming. The juxtaposition of empire's decree versus heaven's birth, as highlighted in Fuquay's book (pg. 20-23), reminded me once again how faithfully St. Stephen's UMC has approached its discernment process. Our primary task has been to answer the

question, "What is our calling?" rather than, "Which side are we choosing?" Instead of issuing decrees, our church has longed for "the revealing of the children of God" (v. 19)—for us to be born again with a renewed sense of calling.

On November 20, 2024, the Church Council here at St. Stephen's voted to adopt the statement on inclusivity, welcoming all persons to fully participate in all ministries of the church as they are gifted, called, or enabled. For some, this statement might seem like the church issuing a decree. For others, it might feel like a final closure to the ongoing struggle. But I want to suggest that this statement is neither. Instead, it is our public commitment to continue groaning with the rest of creation and participating in the suffering of others—

lamenting together in intercession and longing together for God's glorious future.

In other words, the discomfort will remain as we live into the life of the Spirit, which connects us to the suffering of creation and, by extension, to others who suffer. Yet, we do so with hope, knowing that on the other side of these labor pains lies a life-transforming journey: the future glory that is beyond our expectations and comprehension. We groan together in

hopeful anticipation, trusting that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to all who have faithfully engaged in this discussion with us and before us—those who shared their voices in group settings or private conversations, and those who approached this

dialogue with endurance, steadfastness, and perseverance. The fruits of our church's statement will be seen as people experience God's love through Jesus Christ and participate in God's glorious future. Let us, therefore, continue to live out our mission of receiving, reflecting, and relaying Jesus Christ as one church—St. Stephen's United Methodist Church.

Grace & Peace,

*Minoa*

*I was reminded of these ongoing sufferings—struggles that feel like unending labor pains. Labor pains are body-damaging, body-altering, life-giving, and ultimately life-transforming.*



United  
Women  
in Faith

# Small Groups Are Mighty!

Are you ready to visit one of these groups? We are ready to welcome you there or your questions (the Church Office will have the Contact person for you.)

**Service4Others** – Meets monthly on one Thursday night to process/package/create the mission project for that month. A Sign-Up Genius is used to collect donations, which are then given to groups in need, like Lamb Center, Grace Ministries, Shut-ins, Homestretch, or to help St Stephen's with a spruce-up project or other Church group in need of support. Upcoming activities include making soup together for Shut-In's from our Church Family and supporting work for Hypothermia Shelter week. Come see the passionate work that this growing group is planning to do WITH YOUR HELP!

In December the group is providing Christmas gifts and food to our 2 Homestretch families.

**Faithful Friends** - meets once every other month usually second Tuesday evening at someone's home with food, fellowship and a program. What a great small group to feel at home with! Come on over!

**Maranatha Choir** – practices each Tues 9:30 am at church and sing in service once monthly, with special concerts Advent and Spring. Also, sings at a seniors' home twice yearly. Music is a wonderful ministry and brings great self-care. Why not try this out!

The Legacy of United Women in Faith encourages us to support women and children in our communities as we value the fellowship, friendship and support we give and receive in these small groups.

## Love Class Invites More Friends!

"LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED" Class is looking for new friends! We get together twice a month on Thursdays 6:30 to 8:15p for a fun program which could include music, games, crafts, dog visit, devotion, special topic discussion and guests from the church to meet. A parent or aide can attend with the participant and they get to enjoy the group too. Our goal is an inclusive time together with Church family. Please contact the church office so that the leaders can reach out to you with more details.

## Parking Lot Paving

The Trustees would like to inform you of upcoming parking lot paving scheduled for Tuesday, December 10, weather permitting. The work is expected to be completed in a single day.

The affected areas include:

- The roadway and parking section immediately in front of the church
- The lot near the trash dumpster

The newly paved sections will be closed for several days, impacting traffic flow in and out of the parking lot. During this time, two-way traffic will be temporarily directed through the open sections of the lot.

Please exercise caution while navigating from the open parking areas to the building, and follow any directional signage or instructions.

The Trustees appreciate your patience and cooperation as we complete this important project.

Thank you!

## Ministry Council Minute

Ministry Council gathers the leaders from various ministry areas in the church to plan and coordinate missions and ministries that fulfill our desire to share the love of Christ with others. We have been so inspired by the fall sermon series to spiritually stretch just a bit more.

Have you been wondering how to give just 10 minutes more to your spiritual life each day? Have you been wanting to live more from an abundance mindset? We need you! We need all members of the body to share their gifts and talents to grow our ministries. What inspires you? Looking for a place to serve? Fellowship, communication, education, first impressions team, outreach, music and many other areas need your energy and passions.

In the new year, we will have more opportunities to discover our spiritual gifts and find new ways to express our love of God. Join us!

Questions? See Lorac Lawton or Pastor Minoo.

## Advent Studies Offered to Extend and Explore

Looking for a way to deepen your understanding of Advent? FACE is sponsoring Advent studies using the book *On the Way to Bethlehem* by Rob Fuquay, which is also the foundation of the sermon series in December. We will explore the readings helped by our insights from the sermons in an informal and friendly environment. We will have books available in the first class. Drop in when you can. All are welcome!

- Sundays, December 1, 8, 15, and 22 at 10:00 a.m. in the Welcome Center
- Mondays, December 2, 9, 16, and 23 at 7:30 pm on Zoom

See Sue Baker, Lorac Lawton, or Pastor Minoo for more details.

Class will be held at 10 am in room 60 with Sue Baker.

Older children can come to the welcome center for Advent supporting activities with Lorace Lawton and Victoria Bateman.

# Church Communications

*Note: this article was written for a larger audience of church leaders, but it's a worthy conversation in any local congregation. How might we extend our reach through a solid strategy around how we communicate?*

## Communications Strategy: Why It's Important

In today's digital age, churches face a unique challenge: how to effectively communicate and engage with their congregations and the broader community. Traditionally, churches have relied on announcements in bulletins or verbal reminders during services to inform members about upcoming events. While these methods have their place, they often fall short of building deeper connections or reaching diverse audiences. A comprehensive communications strategy that leverages a variety of media can transform a church's ministry, fostering engagement and spiritual growth in ways that resonate with today's world.

### The Limitations of a Scattershot Approach

Many churches publish announcements across multiple platforms—bulletins, social media posts, emails, and more—hoping to reach as many people as possible. However, without a cohesive plan, this approach can feel disjointed and ineffective. Important messages may get lost in the noise, and opportunities to build a deeper connection between the church's mission and its congregation are missed.

### The Power of Intentional Communication

A strategic approach to communication involves more than sharing logistical details; it's about connecting people to the heart of the church's ministry. By tailoring content to specific media platforms and audiences, churches can deepen relationships and create meaningful spiritual experiences.

### Emails: Personalized Engagement

Email is a powerful tool for direct and personalized communication. Weekly newsletters, devotionals, or event updates can keep members informed while providing spiritual encouragement. Segmentation allows churches to cater messages to different groups—families, youth, volunteers, or newcomers—ensuring relevance and fostering a sense of belonging.



*Rev. Steven Martin,  
SSUMC Communications Director*



## Podcasts: Deepening Spiritual Understanding

Podcasts offer an intimate way to delve into faith topics. From sermon series to interviews with ministry leaders or discussions on contemporary issues, podcasts provide a flexible, on-demand format for people to engage with their faith during commutes, workouts, or quiet moments at home.

## Videos: Visual Storytelling

Visual content is compelling and easily shareable. Short videos highlighting mission trips, testimonials, or worship clips can inspire and connect, while longer formats like Bible studies or ministry updates can educate and inform. Platforms like YouTube or Facebook Live extend the church's reach, engaging members and non-members alike.

## Social Media: Building Community

Social media platforms are ideal for creating a sense of community and ongoing dialogue. Regular posts, stories, and interactive content—such as polls, Q&A sessions, or live prayers—keep the church active in people's daily lives. Each platform (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) offers unique opportunities to connect with different demographics.

## A Magazine or Journal: Timeless Reflection

A printed or digital magazine offers a space for more thoughtful, reflective content. Featuring articles, essays, art, and poetry from congregation members, such publications can deepen spiritual growth and foster a sense of shared purpose.

## Transforming Ministry Through Connection

A holistic communications strategy doesn't just share information—it tells the story of the church and its mission in a way that resonates deeply. When people feel connected to the church through meaningful, engaging content, they are more likely to participate, volunteer, and invite others to join.

Moreover, effective communication amplifies a church's ability to minister beyond its walls. Podcasts, videos, and social media can reach those who might never step foot in a sanctuary but are searching for spiritual connection. By intentionally using these tools, churches can fulfill their mission of spreading hope and love more broadly.

## Moving Forward

To develop a comprehensive strategy, churches should start by assessing their current communications efforts and identifying gaps. Engaging a team or consultant with expertise in digital and traditional media can help craft a plan that aligns with the church's mission and resources.

In the end, communication is ministry. When used strategically, it can unite, inspire, and grow the body of Christ in ways that honor both tradition and innovation. By embracing the full spectrum of communication tools, churches can better connect with people, both near and far, and share the timeless message of faith in ways that resonate today.

# Children's Ministries

## Pop-Up Christmas Pageant

We all had a wonderful time at this year's Advent Festival! Enjoy a few photos from the Pop-Up Christmas Pageant!



## Save the Dates:

**MLK Movie** - January 20, 2:00 p.m.

**Parents' Night Out** - February 14, 6:00-9:00 p.m.

**Pancake Supper and Lent Activities** - March 4th

**Courage Quest** - March 22, 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

**Eggstravaganza** - April 19, 2:00-4:00 p.m.

**End of the School Year Party** - June 8, noon-2:00 p.m.

**VBS** - July 14-18, 1:00-4:00 p.m.

# A Walk Through Bethlehem and Living Nativity

December 20, 5:30-7:00 p.m.

We invite you to travel back in time to the night Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Join us for a magical evening of family activities, hot cocoa, Christmas carols and of course, a baby laying in a manger amongst the animals.



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