

THE SPIRE



*Your
Church
Magazine*

March / April 2024



NURTURE FAITH

by Dr. Doug Hood

Senior Pastor

CONDITIONS OF ANSWERED PRAYERS

“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want, and it will be done for you.”

John 15:7 (Common English Bible)

Ernest Hemingway captures the deep disquiet among many who are faithful in the practice of prayer, Christians who go to their knees in prayer but quietly question just how much they can expect from God. Distressed by doubts, a lack of confidence in God’s ability—or desire—to respond to prayer plagues their practice of prayer. In his short story, *The Gambler, The Nun, And The Radio*, Sister Cecilia expresses her heartfelt desire to be a saint—a faithful, sincere desire that she has carried since she was a little girl. Sister Cecilia was absolutely convinced that if she renounced the world and went into the convent, she would become a saint. Now, years later, she still waits for her prayer to be fulfilled. Mr. Frazer, the protagonist of the story, responds to her that, “You’ll be one. Everybody gets what they want. That’s what they always tell me.” But Sister Cecilia expresses doubt, “Now it seems almost impossible.”ⁱ

The great nineteenth century preacher Phillips Brooks once addressed this common difficulty so many people have with prayer, explaining that the Gospel of John identifies two qualities shared by those who can hope to pray successfully. First, what does it mean to “remain in me”?ⁱⁱ It is a phrase that is familiar in the New Testament. To offer clarity, Brooks asks that we think of a child in their earliest years. Those are the years children are so completely absorbed or “hidden” in their parent’s life that you do not look upon them as a separate individual. They are expressions of their parents’ nature. The child’s thoughts and speech are nearly echoes of the parent. In these earliest years we hear a child utter something and immediately we know what has been spoken by the parents in earshot of the child. The parent acts and thinks for the child; the child acts and thinks as the parent. Similarly, we “remain” in Christ as we grow closer to Christlikeness.

The second condition of successful prayer is in the words, “and my words remain in you”. This is the continual and instinctive reference of the definite, explicit teachings and commands of Christ, asserts Brooks. This second condition is not separable from the first—the first is remaining in Christ. In Christ, it is impossible to do anything, say anything, or desire anything but just what is the Lord’s will. Yet, that is incomplete, imperfect, and unreliable without some positive and definite announcement of it in our own words. Returning to the image of the child, words spoken are but echoes of what is heard. To “remain” in Christ necessarily produces the thoughts and words of Christ—a striving to full obedience to the teachings of Christ. Brooks eloquently puts it this way: the soul’s remaining in Christ makes ready to accept Jesus’ words, and then the words lead into a deeper utterance of the desires of God’s heart.

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CHURCH STAFF

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Senior Pastor

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Associate Pastor

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Organist / Director of Music

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THE SPIRE MAGAZINE

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If you or a family member are hospitalized, please notify the church office. Even if you give the name of the church upon admission, the hospital will NOT notify us.

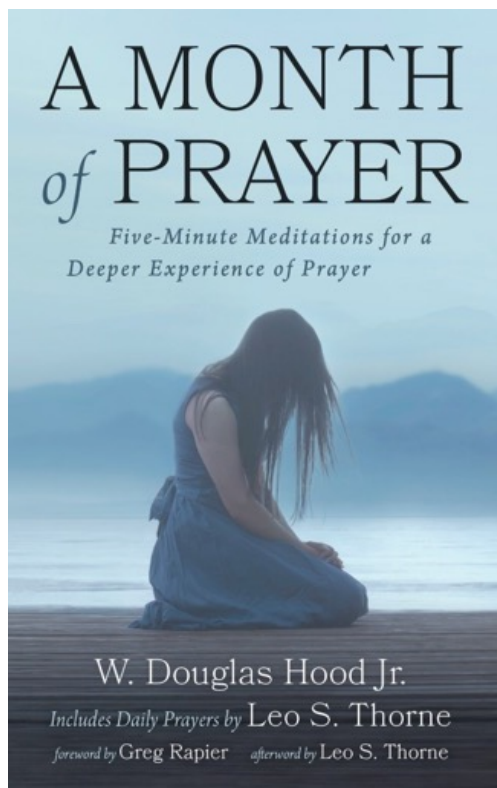
Returning to Hemingway's short story, Sister Cecilia's prayer for much of her life was that she might become a saint. Discouraged that the prayer remains unanswered, she concludes that it may be an impossible prayer. Readers of this short story identify with her—we also have prayers that seem to remain unanswered year after year. How do we reconcile unanswered prayer with the promise that whatever we ask will be done? Perhaps the difficulty is that we jumped with hearts so eager to receive that we fail to notice the prior conditions here in John's Gospel. Ultimately prayer is about one thing—joining our lives so completely with Christ's that Christ's life and ministry continues through us. Prayer is a commitment to reverse the departure of our lives from the life and purposes of Jesus. As we strive to return our lives back to Christ and to “remain” there, and have Christ's words remain in us, our prayers take on fresh power. ●

ⁱ Ernest Hemingway, “The Gambler, The Nun, And The Radio”, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro And Other Stories* (New York, NY: Scribner Classics, 2009) 49.

ⁱⁱ Phillips Brooks, “Prayer”, *The Battle of Life And Other Sermons* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1893) 297.

THE CENTER FOR CHRISTIAN STUDIES PRESENTS DR. MICHAEL B. BROWN

Join us on Sunday, March 10th, as Dr. Michael B. Brown returns to our pulpit as part of our Center for Christian Studies program. Dr. Brown is a favorite of our congregation and will be preaching on gratitude. Make sure to mark this date down on your calendar. ●



“These five-minute meditations fill me with a sense of peace and a fresh understanding of the meaning of prayer. Simple and thought-provoking, they give a deeper perspective of our relationship with God, helping to elevate it to another level.”

~ Kyaunnee Richardson, Opera Singer ~ ●



by Grace Cameron Hood

Director of Children and Family Ministry

EASTER EGG EGGSTRAVAGANZA



The annual Easter Egg Eggstravaganza will be on Sunday, March 24th following the 11 a.m. service. Put this on your calendar now! You are invited to join the fun. We will meet in Fellowship Hall for a Pizza Luncheon followed by an Egg Hunt. Sign-ups begin March 3rd. Be on the lookout!! ●

VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL

VBS is in the planning stages. Put June 10th – 14th, 9 a.m. to noon on your calendars now!!! The planning team includes Birgit Djupedal Fioravante, Grace Hood and Kathy Baldwin.

We will be visiting **Hometown Nazareth, Where Jesus was a Kid**. To make this a wonderful experience for the children, we will need Shopkeepers, Fun & Games Leader, Drama Team actors, and Hometown Tribe Leaders.



Shops include the Bead Bazaar, Olive Oil Shop, Dye Shop, Rock Quarry, and the Food Market. Each of these opportunities are so much fun. To be sure that you get your top choice, please contact Grace (gracehood@firstdelray.com) right away! ●

SUNDAY SCHOOL

Each Sunday morning during Sunday School, children come to hear about Jesus, play together, sing, and play chimes. Everything that is done is to help our children love church and learn about God. The God Squad is busy participating in taking up the Offering, putting together hygiene kits, and learning how God is in their lives. Primary Sunday School children in Ms. Sandy's class are learning the books of the Bible. Ms. Birgit has plans for the children to sing and play in church. Bible Bunch is learning New Testament Bible Stories. The Nursery is a cool and loving place! There is a place for everyone and everyone has a special place in God's House! ●

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by Jeanne Heavilin

2023 CHRISTMAS EVE OFFERING THANK YOU!



This past Christmas Eve, we asked you to help support an innovative program being undertaken by the Milagro Center here in Delray Beach. **StoryMakers** is a program to offer enhanced literacy and language arts instruction to students in their programs and is designed to get kids writing and enjoying the process of reading as they conceive, write and illustrate their own storybooks.

You responded generously. ●

To The Congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach

Thank you so very much for your generous donation of \$15,144 to Milagro Center. You can be confident that your support will go directly towards helping the underserved children and teens enrolled in our afterschool and out-of-school time programs achieve academic success and an indestructible sense of self-worth that will carry them forward in life. Milagro Center's innovative blend of academic, cultural arts, and mentoring programs fosters confidence, creates skills, and provides opportunities for our community's most at-risk youth.

...Thank you for your trust in our organization's mission and for working in tandem with Milagro Center to invest in our future — today's children who will become tomorrow's leaders.

Most sincerely,

Barbara J. Stark
President and CEO



by Ann Gill

MARCH PAJAMA AND BOOK DRIVE FOR MILAGRO CENTER

Milagro Center encourages children and youth to “reach for the stars” while being confronted by the adverse influences they face in the community. “Milagro,” which means “miracle” in Spanish, began in 1997 to provide arts experiences to economically challenged children in Delray Beach. They have expanded their programs to focus on empowering these at-risk youth and their families to succeed in school and in life.

Our church committed to support a new program they are implementing this year called the *StoryMakers* Program through our 2023 Christmas Eve Offering. We want to continue supporting these students by donating new pajamas and books to each one of the 150 children and youth they serve. We will collect new pajamas in children’s sizes 6-16, and adult sizes for youth in sizes S, M, and L. We will also collect new books for children in grades kindergarten through high school. Books should be appropriate for these age groups and not religious in nature.

As we give new pajamas and books, we are standing with Milagro Center as they encourage students to “reach for the stars.” It is our hope for the children and youth to have good rest, sweet dreams, and a bright future. It is our prayer that “good nights will lead to good days!” Books help to fuel their imaginations and impart knowledge. Thank you for your support!

Sweet dreams! ●



HOLY WEEK WORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Palm Sunday Worship Services

in the Sanctuary
Sunday, March 24th
9 a.m. and 11 a.m.

Maundy Thursday Worship Service

in the Sanctuary
Thursday, March 28th
7 p.m.

Easter Sunday Worship Services

in the Sanctuary
Sunday, March 31st
9 a.m. and 11 a.m.



WHAT IS HOLLY HOUSE?

Every Holly House volunteer has been asked this question at one time or another. It is not an easy question to answer because it means different things to different people.

For some, it is a way to share their creativity through flower arranging, sewing, shell crafts, jewelry making, and service projects involving writing cards to the armed forces. Members meet every Tuesday and Thursday to work on projects, check in with friends, minister to the needs of members, and discover new ways to serve this ministry of the First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach.

Many of the members are new residents to Florida and come to Holly House after deciding that the First Presbyterian Church of Delray will be their church home. It is possible that their first encounter with Holly House came with the Christmas Bazaar or the Rummage Sale and asked, “How can I volunteer?”, and the rest, as they say, is history. Since the pandemic, many of us are reconnecting in new ways, proceeding cautiously when “getting out there again.” Especially after the period of isolation, Holly House has been a lifesaver for many.

First and foremost, we are a mission of our church and enjoy every minute of our service. Holly House has provided all its members a way to reach out and make a difference. The good times, friendships, and comfort from faithful service are the blessings we receive.

When someone asks me what is Holly House? I tell them it is my happy place and, for me, that says it best. ●



GIFTS TO OUR CHURCH

Food for the Needy from Chris and Lynn Yates.

Holly House from Bob and Noreen Buss, in loving memory of Marie Buss; and from Heather Dennis, in honor of Merrill Beveridge.

Memorial Garden Fund in loving memory of John J. and Janet M. Loennecker, by daughter Karen and son-in-law Don Carter.

Music Fund from Cliff Roberson.

Operating Fund from the Lattner Family Foundation, in loving memory of Forrest C. and Frances H. Lattner.

Remembrance Fund from Frank and Barbara Cook, in loving memory of Ron Barrett; from Cindy Melamed, in loving memory of Glenn Barton's father, Lewis Barton; and from David Parrish, in loving memory of June Parrish. ●

ETERNAL LIVES

Our Deepest Sympathies as a congregation are extended to the families of the following members upon the death of their loved ones:

- Jim Pahlke –
December 5, 2023
- John Kennedy –
December 14, 2023
- Carol Powanda –
December 22, 2023
- Al Hulse –
January 10, 2024



SESSION REPORT

During December and January, the Session approved a baptism and received fifteen new members. ●

NEW MEMBERS

Ben Alford

Ian Brown

Melissa Brown

Will Brown

Cheryl Cooper

Walter Crutcher

Patricia LeClere

Gary Pomeroy

Sally Pomeroy

Allison Potter



WELCOME!

by **Connie Timmons**

HOLLY HOUSE

"I am having so much fun!"

"This is amazing!"

"I'm coming back next year!"

The annual Step-Above Rummage Sale is complete for 2024. Our sale was a success thanks to the generous donations from all of you, the willingness of volunteers, and the hours of preparation and organization by the women of Holly House. To date, the proceeds from the sale are \$23,159. We are blessed to be able to serve in this ministry and thank you for your continued support. ●



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Holly House is a ministry of First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach.

by Maryann Rana

Prayer Ministry Team

PRAYER ON BEHALF OF OTHERS

When it comes to trusting in the Lord for prayer on behalf of others we must relinquish complete and total control into his hands. We must let go and recognize that he is God. This is his world, he made it and he controls it. Our part is responsive in the litany of love. Guard this gift in your heart as he has planted it there for us to use when we bring our prayer requests to him. We can then thank him for the answers he has set in motion before we can ever discern them.

“That’s enough! Now know that I am God! I am exalted among all nations; I am exalted throughout the world!”

Psalm 46:10 (Common English Bible)

“...but now I will heal and mend them. I will make them whole and bless them with an abundance of peace and security.”

Jeremiah 33:6 (Common English Bible)

Prayer requests come through the church office and are then distributed to team members. Each request is carefully and thoughtfully lifted up in prayer with respect and confidentiality. Please call Nancy Fine in the church office (561-276-6338) for more information or if you are interested in joining. ●

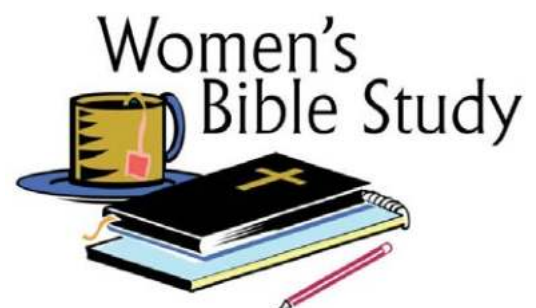


by Maria Graham

MONDAY MORNING WOMEN’S BIBLE STUDY

The Monday Morning Women’s Lenten Bible Study started on February 19th and will conclude on March 25th. “Arts and Faith: Lent 2024” is our guide, and we are using scripture, artwork, and music to add depth to our devotional life as we spiritually prepare ourselves for the joy of Easter.

In April, we continue our journey through the Bible with Rev. Tim Keller’s video series “Discovering the Gospel in Every Book of the Bible”, picking up with ‘1 and 2 Kings’. Tim shows the part each book plays in moving along the story of the gospel from creation to fall to redemption and restoration. He describes the role of the principle of the Bible—that we are saved by God’s grace alone and not by our works—in each book. He tells how the books of the Old Testament point forward toward Jesus. We are finding Tim’s presentation to be enlightening, inspiring, and enjoyable, and invite anyone interested in joining us to contact Maria Graham (mmg2352@gmail.com). We meet via Zoom at 10 a.m. on Monday mornings. Come join us as we learn, laugh, and pray together. ●





by Dr. Doug Hood

Senior Pastor

The following is from Confronting Life's Challenges: Sermons on the Struggles We Face which features sermons by Doug Hood, Greg Rapier, and John "Skip" Randolph.

ARE YOU GRIEVING?

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

"Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about people who have died so that you won't mourn like others who don't have any hope. Since we believe that Jesus died and rose, so we also believe that God will bring with him those who have died in Jesus.

So encourage each other with these words."

1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14, 18 (Common English Bible)

Martin Luther said, "I have held many things in my hands, and lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess."

There is a delightful story of the Englishman who was riding on a train from Scotland to London absorbed in his morning paper. Because he was reading the newspaper, he didn't notice when a very cheery Scotsman boarded the train and seated himself directly across the aisle from him. The Scotsman said to the Englishman, "Good morning." The Englishman was so absorbed in the newspaper that he didn't respond. The Scotsman then said, "Isn't this a beautiful country?" Again, the Englishman ignored the Scotsman. In one final attempt to get the Englishman's attention, the Scotsman leaned over the newspaper and said, "How do you like Scotland anyway?" Unable to ignore the Scotsman any longer, the Englishman responded, "I hate Scotland. It's cold, it's damp, and there are too many Presbyterians

here." The Scotsman replied, "Well then, my friend, why don't you go to hell? It's warm, it's dry, and there are no Presbyterians there!" I invite you this morning to hear an important truth: whether we are going to London, heaven or hell, we are always moving from one place to another.

This is precisely the important truth that the Apostle Paul is making to the Church in Thessalonica; that

we are always moving from one place to another until we reach our final destination of eternal life with God. Death isn't the end. Death is merely movement from life here on earth to life with God in heaven.

Yet, these words from Paul are among the most misunderstood words in the entire Bible. The misunderstanding goes something like this. If we have faith in God and believe in the promises



of Jesus Christ, then when a loved one dies we will not grieve. After all, grief is for those who have no faith: for those who do not have the promises of the Bible to assure them of eternal life. Those who believe know with certainty where their loved one goes after death so we must choke back tears. That is the faithful response to the death of someone we love.

This is not what Paul is saying here in 1 Thessalonians. Paul wouldn't say this. Paul understands that grief is a part of God's most perfect design of human beings. Grief is the most natural way that we demonstrate to others and to ourselves that the one who died meant a great deal to us; that our lives are the richer because of them. No, Paul is not asking us to stand strong in the midst of loss and avoid expressions of grief. What Paul is asking us is not to grieve like those who have no hope in the person of Jesus Christ. Grieve,

yes. But, grieve differently.

That, of course, begs the question, what is the difference? The difference is an important one. Those who have no hope in Jesus Christ haven't heard the Gospel; that in the power of the cross, death is destroyed and everlasting life is received. For those who haven't heard the Gospel, death is simply the end. There is no more for the person who has died. Such loss, such grief is devastating. The relationship with someone once loved is forever gone. That is how those "who don't have any hope" grieve.

Paul fully expects that we will experience grief when someone close to us dies. What Paul is asking is that we remember the promises of our faith, that death isn't the end of life. Paul is encouraging us to experience grief that is mingled with the good news that our separation from a loved one

is only temporary. God's promised resurrection from the dead is for those we love and for us. Because of God, there will be a heavenly reunion for all who have died. And, at that time, death will be no more, promises the Book of Revelation. What each of us will have is life that never ends with one another and with God. That is the Gospel. That is the good news of our faith. With that knowledge, we grieve differently because we know we shall be with our loved ones again.

Please understand that the period of grief is different for each person. Some may experience grief for many years following the death of a loved one. Don't be alarmed if grief lingers for a long time. But, always hold on to the knowledge that there is more to come. The relationship that we treasured, the relationship that enriched our lives, has not come to a final end. In Jesus Christ, we shall be together again. Grief is simply an expression that what we had with another was very good.

In our lesson from Mark's Gospel, Jesus confronts a man who is out of his mind. He is so crazed that he howls day and night and cuts himself with sharp stones. Mark tells us that people have become terrified of him, that no one is able to restrain him. Yet, Jesus confronts him face to face. Jesus isn't frightened of him.

John Claypool, that wonderful preacher, tells us that he had a New Testament instructor once advance a theory of why this man was so crazy, so out of his mind. The clue was in the man's location; the man was in

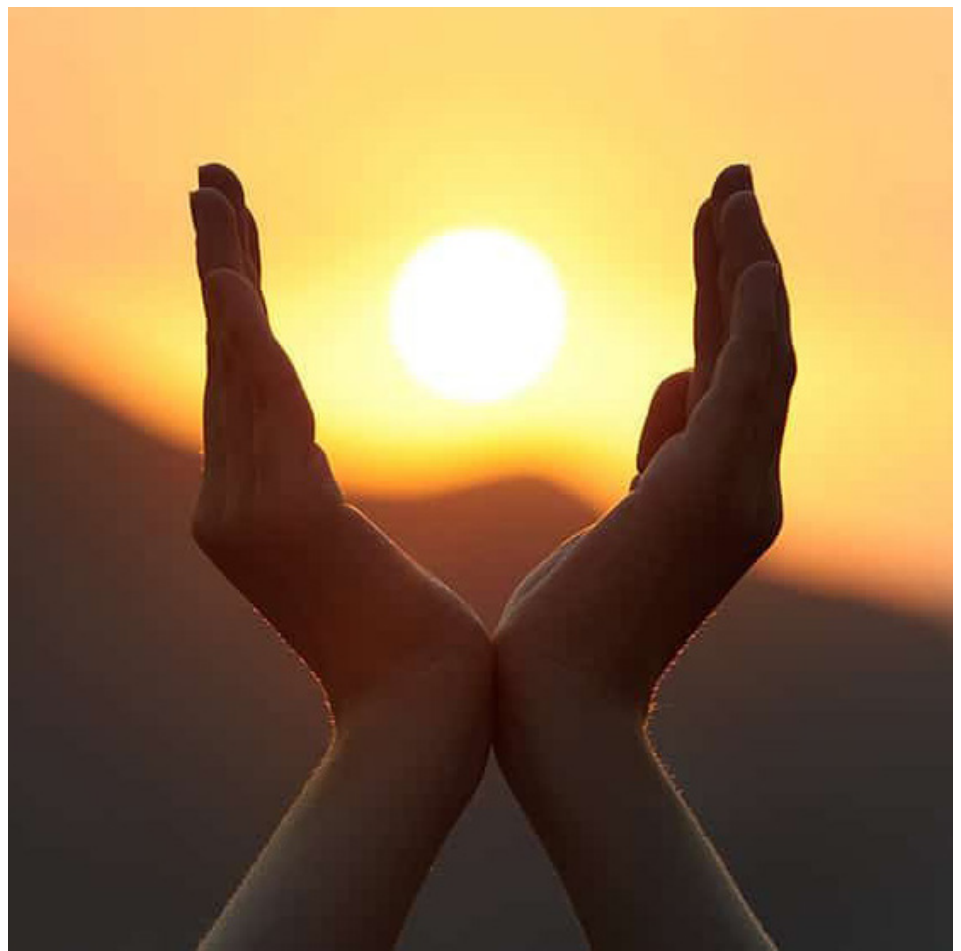


a cemetery. According to this one biblical scholar, it may be that this man brought a loved one to the cemetery to be buried. And, he is one of those that Paul speaks of that have no hope. The man thought that death was the end: the end of life, the end of their relationship. Such was this man's despair that he literally lost his mind and was unable to leave the place where he buried his wife, his brother, or dear friend. His grief defeated him. That is until he is confronted by the person of Jesus. In Jesus, he sees for the first time the hope that there is more to life than death can take away. In Jesus Christ, hope is restored: that he will again continue the relationship that ended with death.

Paul wants us to understand that death is movement from one place to another. The power of death is destroyed when we grasp this truth of our faith.

There is something more in Paul's words to the Church in Thessalonica. Paul concludes his teaching on death and eternal life by instructing us to "encourage each other with these words." Paul's concern is that grief may become so great for any of us that we forget the promises of Jesus. The result, then, is that we fall into hopelessness and lose our minds like the crazed man in Mark's story. As a community of faith, we are to watch out for one another, stand with one another in loss, and encourage one another with the promises of our faith.

Many of you know that I have a deep admiration for great preachers, both those who lived before me and those who practice their craft today.



One preacher whose work has deeply influenced my own preaching died before I began preparation for ministry, Andrew Blackwood. I was introduced to him through his written works. For some twenty-five years, he taught preaching at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Imagine, then, the sheer joy I experienced in the year 2000 when I began my ministry as pastor of Lenape Valley Presbyterian Church in New Britain, Pennsylvania and learned that a member of that congregation was one of Andrew's sons, Phil Blackwood. I developed a friendship with him that became one of my greatest treasures, personally and professionally.

Mr. Blackwood and I shared frequent lunches where he shared rich

stories of growing up at Princeton. Among Mr. Blackwood's colorful stories of life in Princeton was that Dr. Albert Einstein was the baby-sitter of choice for the Blackwood family. Isn't that amazing, that Dr. Einstein enjoyed babysitting?

Some days Mr. Blackwood would put on a suit and tie simply to accompany me for a drive through Bucks County as we spoke of ministry and preaching in particular. One day I asked him if there was anything I could do special for him. He mentioned that it had been a very long time since he had been in Princeton, that he would enjoy seeing Princeton with me. We made plans for that to happen.

When the day came for our time together in Princeton, Mr. Blackwood

was again in a coat and tie. We made the hour's drive to Princeton. We walked the familiar campus of Princeton Theological Seminary, stories around every corner. He showed me the home he grew up in and the home, just next door, where Dr. Einstein lived. We then walked the campus of Princeton University, which is next door to the seminary, followed by a late lunch. Following lunch, I could see that Mr. Blackwood was exhausted and I suggested that we return home for the day. There was no disagreement from him.

I walked Mr. Blackwood to his room at the retirement community where he lived and as we were saying goodbye, he said to me, "Doug, I love you. You are a good friend. I'll see you in the morning." He then repeated, "I'll see you in the morning." I had no

plans to see Mr. Blackwood the next day and my schedule was already full of appointments. But, he was ninety-one years old, tired from the day at Princeton, so I just thought he was confused and said nothing.

The next morning when I arrived at work there was a man waiting for me in the parking lot of the church. He introduced himself as the nephew of Mr. Blackwood. He told me how much his uncle loved me and his gratitude for all that I had done for him. I quickly asked why he spoke in the past tense. "I am sorry," he said. "I thought you had been told. My uncle died last night in his sleep."

My tears were instant. With a man I had just met, I could not control my tears. "How? What? We were just

together yesterday. He told me that he loved me. He told me..." Then I remembered. Blackwood is a Scottish name. The Blackwood family was a Scottish family. Scottish Christians have a saying they share with loved ones when they know they are dying, "I'll see you in the morning," meaning that we will see one another next in heaven. They are words meant to encourage loved ones so they will have comfort in their loss.

The Apostle Paul tells the Church in Thessalonica, and he tells us, to encourage one another so that we don't lose hope. Mr. Blackwood must have known that he was dying. His last words to me were of Christian hope. That is the other side of grief. Amen. ●



WHY MAUI NOW?

How Our 2024 One Great Hour of Sharing and Easter Offering Will Make an Impact

“...*Escaping with the clothes on our backs. Lives in tatters. Homes gone. Businesses gone. Jobs gone. Lives lost.*”¹ Imagine what that means: your home burned with everything in it, including your documents and financial records. The school your children attended is ashes. The business where you worked is gone. You are left with your mortgage and no place to live, no income. You need food and funds to rent shelter for your family.

The Event hit the national headlines: On August 8, 2023, wildfires converged in Lahaina, in northwest Maui, burning 3,200 acres and destroying an estimated 2,200 buildings, most of which were residential. Deemed the worst natural disaster in Hawaii’s history, the fire destroyed sacred spaces and historic buildings, as Lahaina was the jewel of the historic Kingdom of Hawaii.

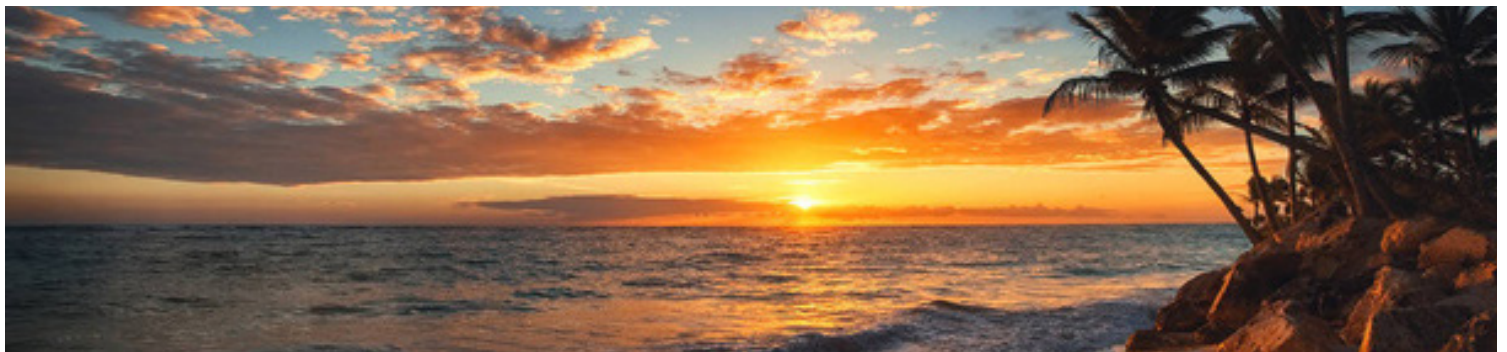
The First Responders: FEMA and the Red Cross delivered disaster supplies. Plans for a multi-year, perhaps multi-decade rebuilding have begun. The United Way has identified priorities of long-term housing, children and education, mental health, and jobs. This takes time to accomplish. Even insurance for those fortunate enough to have it takes time to come through.

So how can we at First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach stand in the gap for those on Maui while they begin anew? The Mission Outreach Ministry Team has determined that we can have the greatest impact by supporting Po’okela Church in Maui, which has been providing hope to the local community, assisting victims of the Maui wildfires last August. Po’okela Church is a member of the Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ and its pastor, the Rev. Dr. Kimberly Fong, is a minister member of the Pacific Presbytery of our denomination.

Dr. Fong has identified that the major needs now, six months after the fires, are for housing and food. We will designate the One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS) offering to purchase gift cards for food, which Po’okela will distribute. This will aid hundreds of individuals and families in the area, allowing them to save for rentals (now averaging \$3,500/month for a two-bedroom unit). This will also support a local supermarket, Foodland, further cycling our funds into the local economy. Foodland is offering Po’okela Church a 6% discount on gift cards purchased, increasing our contribution.

Please open your hearts to these in our 50th state who have lost everything. Let us send the love of Christ across the miles, giving them the strength to walk with him as they rebuild their lives. ●

¹Popham, David K., Conference Minister United Church of Christ, United Church of Christ of Hawaii website, initial post following the Hawaiian wildfires, August 9, 2023.





First Delray Concert Series

Music by the Sea

FIRST DELRAY CONCERT SERIES: LIFTING SPIRITS AND SPREADING THE WORD

“All music asks of us is that we listen to it.”

Frances Wilson, Interlude Magazine

The First Concert – A Rousing Success!

On **January 14th**, we held the first of four concerts scheduled for 2024. Anyone who attended can attest to the excitement, community, and joy that filled our Sanctuary when “The Latin Divos” graced us with their incredible musicianship and crowd-pleasing, and often humorous, style. The blessings that were manifested that afternoon were many and varied—from having to ease a few more people into each pew to accommodate the crowd, to the busy ticket table as people secured tickets for future concerts, to having people inquire about our church and its worship services. Not to mention the smiles, the hugs, and the animated conversations as all who attended were buoyed up by the spirit of the music and reached out to share the goodwill with others.





Looking Ahead

Those of you who attended The Latin Divos know that we had not one but two of our regular soloists, Fernando Gonzalez and Mario Arevalo, as performers, as well as our own Shane Tanner as MC. What could be better? Perhaps our next concert **“Broadway & Opera Classics”**, scheduled for **March 10th**, where you will have the opportunity to hear many more of the First Delray soloists as they take us through an enchanting program of Broadway tunes, opera favorites, and standards from the American Songbook. Listening to them perform this very different kind of repertoire from what you hear on Sunday mornings is going to be a special treat, as will the appearances of some special guest performers (*ah, now we have you thinking!*). In addition, Don Cannarozzi will be at the piano as the accompanist for this varied program of well-known musical hits, sung by our amazingly talented professionals.



Whether you are a classical music lover or not, come and let **“The Magic of Mozart”** inspire you in this truly extraordinary concert on **April 21st** featuring the exceptional talent of Don Cannarozzi and Tao Lin, one of South Florida’s premiere pianists and a faculty member at Lynn University, performing Mozart’s *Concerto No. 10* for two pianos. Yes, two grand pianos and a 25-piece orchestra will be gracing the chancel in the Sanctuary. You might even want to attend just to see how we fit them all! The concert will also feature solos and ensembles from *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*, as well as several well-known concert arias. Along with four of our soloists, we have invited several guest singers.



This all-Mozart concert is a very special one for Don Cannarozzi, enabling him to fulfill several dreams. He shared with the Concert Team that he has always wanted to conduct an orchestra and has always wanted to play this concerto. Don is dedicating this concert in loving memory of his departed soulmate, Sergio. Knowing Don’s feelings about this concert will make it extra special for us all.

As our snowbirds return, the First Delray soloists will be tuning up for the final concert of the year, **“This Land Is Your Land”** on **November 10th**, a tribute to our veterans and a celebration of our nation’s beauty and diversity. Be sure to put this one on your calendar to wrap up what we know will be a fabulous first season!



The fruits of the Concert Series’ first performance were truly what the First Delray Concert Series Planning Team had hoped and prayed for, and more. The Team is incredibly grateful to everyone in the congregation who stepped forward to be a sponsor for this new music mission, and to everyone who volunteered and attended. With your help and support, the series has amazing potential to demonstrate the love and caring that we know emanates from First Delray.

Visit www.firstdelray.com/2024-concert-series for more information. ●



THE WELCOMING MINISTRY AT FIRST DELRAY

“And serve each other according to the gift each person has received, as good managers of God’s diverse gifts.”

1 Peter 4:10 (Common English Bible)

The Welcome Team began serving in May 2021. From day one, it has filled a special purpose—greeting members and visitors at the Lobby doors. Schedules are offered one to two months in advance, hoping the frequency to serve is one Sunday monthly or every other month. The commitment is flexible, and a substitute is available when needed.

Those serving on the Welcome Team have the unique opportunity to perhaps be the FIRST person to greet a member or visitor when they arrive. The greeter’s smile might just be what was needed for that individual!

Glenn Barton, a Welcome Team volunteer, relayed this story and his feelings about this ministry:

“When I was greeting, I met a woman who was just coming back to church after several years, and was interested in some of the fellowship activities that we hold. I was happy to speak to her intelligently about our programs and give her some of our comprehensive printed materials. Thanks for managing this important ministry at the Church. It touches everyone who passes through those doors in one way or another!”

This is an invitation for you to contact Carolyn Kettle (recruiting/scheduling for the Welcome Team) to indicate that you would like to be a part of this ministry to welcome people warmly and sincerely into our place of worship. Please reach out to Carolyn (561-504-9550 or carolynskettle@gmail.com) for more details. We hope you will join us! ●

CO-PASTORING MOVES FORWARD – STAY “IN THE KNOW”!

On February 4th, the second of two Town Halls was held to take questions and offer additional information on the co-pastoring model and its implementation at First Delray. The Co-Pastoring Team was pleased by the number of congregants who attended and by their thoughtful questions.

Key points were made that drove home why our church leadership made the decision to adopt a co-pastoring model as Dr. Hood moves toward retirement at the end of 2027. At the suggestion of several attendees, we share them here.

Why Co-Pastoring and Not a Search at the Time of Dr. Hood’s Retirement?

- **Did you know that by 2026, 75% of pastors in our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), will be over 65?!** Clearly, this leaves us with a very small group of individuals

who are young enough, yet experienced enough, that we would consider them for the role of pastor.

- **The aging of the ministerial pool is coupled with a very significant decline in the number of people graduating with Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degrees from Presbyterian seminaries: this number dropped 45% from 2005 to 2021.**
- **Of this smaller number of M.Div. graduates, fewer and fewer are choosing to seek pastoral roles in congregations. In 2021, the PC(USA) ordained 156 teaching elders** (that is, those commissioned to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments). **That was 30% fewer graduates than in 2018.** Like Dr. Hood's son, Nathanael, who has taken a chaplaincy at a hospital, recent graduates are choosing other ways to serve. No doubt they are influenced, at least in part, by the turmoil that many congregations have experienced during COVID and continuing into the present as politics have affected our churches. Being the pastor of a congregation is a more stressful role than ever before.

While all these facts draw a rather bleak picture of what it would be like to recruit for Dr. Hood's position in about three years' time, equally important to the Session in its decision making was the fact that we have a tremendously talented successor right in our midst!

How Do Rev. Rapier's Credentials Compare?

You may be wondering how Rev. Rapier's credentials stack up. Here are a few comparisons to the career paths of First Delray's current and previous pastor that we noted in the Town Hall:

- **Rev.** Rapier took his first pastoral call as Associate Pastor here at First Delray at age 26 in 2018. For comparison, Dr. Theodore Bush, who preceded Dr. Hood as pastor, accepted his first call at age 30, as an assistant pastor of Christian Education at a church in Illinois, where he served in this capacity for eight years before coming to First Delray. Dr. Hood's first call was as associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Columbus, GA at the age of 27.
- **Dr.** Bush came to us at age 38 in 1984, with the experience just noted, and without having yet achieved a doctorate degree. Rev. Rapier will be 36 when he becomes pastor, a little younger than Dr. Bush, but four years after he is awarded his doctoral degree, which will take place in May of this year.
- **M.**Div. graduates must have three years of work experience before they may start work toward a

Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) degree. The fact that Rev. Rapier began studying for his doctorate as soon as it was allowed says something about his commitment to his calling, especially given that he was employed by us full-time and had begun raising a family at the same time he was doing doctoral work.

- **T**he experience of the last search team testifies to the fact that many of the available pastoral candidates in the pool would not meet our needs or standards at First Delray, now the largest congregation in the Presbytery of Tropical Florida.

Holding on to the Talent in Our Midst

By the time he becomes pastor, Rev. Rapier will have served in a broadly-defined role as Associate for six years, and then Co-Pastor for four years. He will have had substantial experience, a good deal of which he has already acquired, in performing critical pastoral roles: preaching, counseling, conducting weddings and funerals, working in concert with the Session and Trustees on both spiritual and administrative issues, and handling differences of opinion that can arise in any congregation. In addition, both Rev. Rapier and Dr. Hood will benefit from having a coach, selected by the Presbytery, to help them become effective co-pastors.

Byond the experience that Rev. Rapier has gained at First Delray, he has also served quite frequently, in a number of ways, at churches in the local area without a pastor. In addition, Rev. Rapier has been the chair of the Human Resource Committee of the Presbytery of Tropical Florida, AND he has just been chosen to serve on the Committee on Ministry—a very prestigious appointment. The Presbytery, as well as the churches who have already made known their interest in Rev. Rapier, know that we have an outstanding talent already on our staff. Dr. Hood and the leadership team are confident that Rev. Rapier is, as they say, “a keeper.”

What Happens Next?

As was explained at the Town Hall, the next major step in which you, the congregation, will be involved is approving the call of Rev. Rapier and Dr. Hood to co-pastoring. The meeting at which this vote is taken will occur in the next several months—stay tuned for the date. Prior to this meeting, the Co-Pastoring Team needs to seek and achieve approval for this call, first from the Committee on Ministry, and then from the Presbytery of Tropical Florida.

Be aware that, in order to vote, 1) you must be a full member of First Delray, and 2) you must be physically present for the meeting. Church protocol says we cannot take votes electronically. Also, if you are an affiliate member here, meaning your primary membership is with another congregation, you will not be able to vote.



by Nathanael Hood



AMERICAN FICTION

A Movie Review by Nathanael Hood, MA, New York University;
MDiv, Princeton Theological Seminary

2023 was an...odd year for Hollywood. Seldom have so many big-budget tent-pole films crashed, burned, and cratered at the box office. Superhero films no longer proved a safe bet for major studios, and many previously reliable franchises like Indiana Jones, Transformers, and Mission: Impossible made money, yes, but not the kind that make such bloated CGI spectacles practicable (or profitable) in the long term. Instead, the biggest money-makers and mightiest critical darlings have been odd, idiosyncratic passion projects. Consider, for example, this year's slate of nominees for the Academy Award for Best Picture. Among the current front-runners are, incredibly, a three-and-a-half hour historical drama, a three-hour biopic, a two-and-a-half hour French courtroom drama, a two-and-a-half hour sex comedy, and—I must stress I say

this with affection—a two-hour Mattel commercial that somehow made roughly 1.5 billion dollars.

And then there's Cord Jefferson's *American Fiction*. Made for figurative pocket change by a first-time director, the film was based on Percival Everett's semi-obscure 2001 novel *Erasure*, a withering satire about one black writer's struggle for relevance in the lily-white world of American publishing. After his latest manuscript gets rejected by the umpteenth publisher for not being "black enough," critically-acclaimed (but poor-selling) African-American novelist Thelonious "Monk" Ellison (Jeffrey Wright) finds himself in desperate need for money after a series of personal tragedies puts his family in financial peril. Partly in protest and partly to amuse himself, the erudite and

overly-literary Monk churns out a new "autobiographical" manuscript entitled *My Pafology* which shamelessly panders to every negative black stereotype imaginable—in other words, exactly what the publishing industry wants.

To his surprise and horror, the manuscript proves a smash hit, sparking a publisher bidding war which catapults Monk's imaginary gangster alter-ego into overnight literary celebrity. Incredibly, Monk's every attempt to walk things back backfire and blow up in his face: he claims that the book's "writer" is a wanted fugitive on the lam, but that gets him invited onto talk shows; he changes the book's title to a four-letter expletive, but it's praised by the literary world as "daring" and "confrontational"; he tries to sabotage its chances of winning a

continued on page 25

prestigious literary award he just so happens to be a judge for, but he's out-voted by the white jurists who love it and it wins. What can you say? Poor Monk just can't lose for winning.

Monk's unexpected success sends him spiraling into an existential crisis, one made worse by his mother Agnes' (Leslie Uggams) rapid descent into Alzheimer's. Starved for cash so he can put her in a decent full-time care home, Monk relents, puts aside his considerable pride and principles, and plays the publishing industry's game. At least at first.

Reading this plot summary, one could be forgiven for thinking *American Fiction* to be as direct and confrontational as the films

of some of Jefferson's black film-making peers like Spike Lee and Boots Riley. And while it definitely is both those things, if I had to describe the film in three words it would be "gentle and grounded." It's rightfully angry and exasperated for the ridiculous double standards black artists face, but it never surrenders to those emotions. The two black directors Jefferson reminds me the most of with this debut are Ava DuVernay and Barry Jenkins, both known for politically charged films which are nonetheless rich with grace, compassion, and humanity. The characters in this film are just so, well, human. I love how Monk's extended family poke, prod, tease, and laugh with each other, especially in moments of grief or anger. I love Monk's tender relationship with his

estranged brother Cliff (Sterling K. Brown) who exiled himself from their family into a life of hedonistic, self-destructive excess after their mother rejected him for being gay. For all its satire, this is a film that deeply, deeply loves people because of, and not in spite of, their imperfections. Hopefully this film's nomination for Best Picture will get more people to seek it out, because it deserves to be seen. Whatever Jefferson does next in his career, you can be sure I'll be paying attention.

[Potential viewers should note that the film does contain rather graphic profanity and isn't appropriate for younger audiences.] ●

Several final thoughts. At the close of the Town Hall, Dr. Hood made a point of sharing the fact that it was **his** suggestion that we pursue a path toward co-pastoring. While there are pastors out there who would wait until very close to their retirement to even let the congregation know of their intention, Dr. Hood has been planning ahead to ensure that he will leave First Delray strong, healthy, and in good hands. Having observed, coached, and watched Rev. Rapier grow since his arrival at First Delray, Dr. Hood believes he is the right pastor for this congregation, as does church leadership. The Co-Pastoring Team hopes that you will join with prayer and words of encouragement in supporting Rev. Rapier and Dr. Hood as they prepare to take on this next phase of ministering to our congregation. ●

WALKS WITH THOUGHTS

Gumbo Limbo. Doesn't the name make you smile? For me it conjures up images of spicy New Orleans crawfish stew mixed with a back-bending dance that always winds up with several people giggling on the floor.

Why name a nature center Gumbo Limbo? Here in south Florida the answer is that one of our prolific native trees is the gumbo limbo. But why are the trees themselves named gumbo limbo? That remains a mystery. However, less of a mystery is why their nickname is the "tourist tree": the peeling reddish bark of these trees resembles the sunburned skin of careless tourists.

Today I am here visiting Gumbo Limbo Nature Center off of A1A in Boca Raton. Most people come to view the two large deepwater aquariums filled with colorful coral and tropical fish. Or to view the injured adult sea turtles: loggerheads, leatherbacks, and green turtles recuperating in large concrete tanks.



But this morning, after a restless night, fraught with real and imagined problems and anxieties, I am here to walk the trails. To enjoy the Ashley trail and butterfly garden to the north, to walk the southern trail with its cool shaded boardwalk and soothing views of the Intracoastal, and to talk with my God.

A park volunteer directs me to the north loop of the front parking lot. The entrance to the butterfly garden and Ashley trail lies only a few steps from my parked car. Here all is silence and brilliant color: green leaves, flashy red fire bushes, deep purple passion flowers. I catch the scent of basil, then a hint of menthol as I bend low over a cluster of Cuban oregano. The only movement in the garden is the flutter of butterfly wings. Black and yellow zebra longwings dance among the bushes and circle about my head.

Leaving the garden, I walk the short sandy path to Lake Wyman, part of the Intracoastal Waterway. Here is a less flamboyant beauty. Colors are muted at this small beach. The sand beneath my feet and at the bottom of the clear light blue water is brown. Wispy grey and white clouds float above the two sailboats anchored in the lake. The distant shore is lined with dull green mangroves.

Be thou my vision. The song from last Sunday's church service pops into my head. I pause at the end of that first verse: "waking or sleeping, thy presence my light." Here in the middle of the morning, my prayers are of gratitude, but last night, waking at 3 a.m. my worries and anxieties were in full

bloom and my prayers asked for help—help for myself and others. Maybe that's natural. After all, the first prayer many of us learned was the bedtime "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep..." an asking prayer. But that first simple daylight prayer "God is great, God is good, let us thank him..." was a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. Custom surely. But maybe not custom only. I recall Psalm 30, verse 5, which tells us the anxieties of the night are temporary: "weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."

And here at Gumbo Limbo as I walk through the visitor's center and onto the southern boardwalk, I feel joyous. I laugh at my first encounter with a gumbo limbo tree, the tourist tree. The peeling bark is indeed an iridescent copper. I smile as I again encounter the wide expanse of Lake Wyman. And I send up a prayer of praise as I walk with the Lord in this beautiful place.

I encourage you to come visit Gumbo Limbo. Experience your own joy as you banish the night's anxieties. Marvel at the butterflies, trees, and quiet lake vistas. Then offer up your own prayer of praise.

Endnotes: The turtle rehabilitation center is temporarily closed. However, Gumbo Limbo personnel say that once the Coastal Stewards receive the applied-for permit from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the rehab center will reopen.

The south loop of the main lot is closed due to renovation work; however, I'm told additional paid parking is available at Red Reef West, at the southern end of Gumbo Limbo's boardwalk. ●

by Rev. Greg Rapier

Associate Pastor



IN THE WORLD ... CONNECTING CHURCH AND CULTURE

God in the Branches

The other day, I shared a meal with a few congregants, both of whom are professional actors and teach the craft to others. I asked what I'm sure was to them a painfully open-ended question: How do you teach people to act?

After some thought, one of the actors, Amy, answered, "I suppose it begins with listening and observing."

She explained that she teaches her students the difference between hearing and listening, seeing and observing. One is passive, and the other is active. When you're building a character, she says, you want to study human movement and behavior, observe with curiosity, and listen with intent. With intent and curiosity, the world around you transforms into a playground of

sorts. The result is nothing less than a fundamental shift in how you view the world.

I'm reminded of Easter Sunday growing up, how a backyard can morph into someplace magical as you search its nooks and crannies for egg-shaped treasure. How a tree stops being a tree and becomes something else entirely, a possibility maybe, each low-hanging branch an opportunity to discover something beautiful and new.

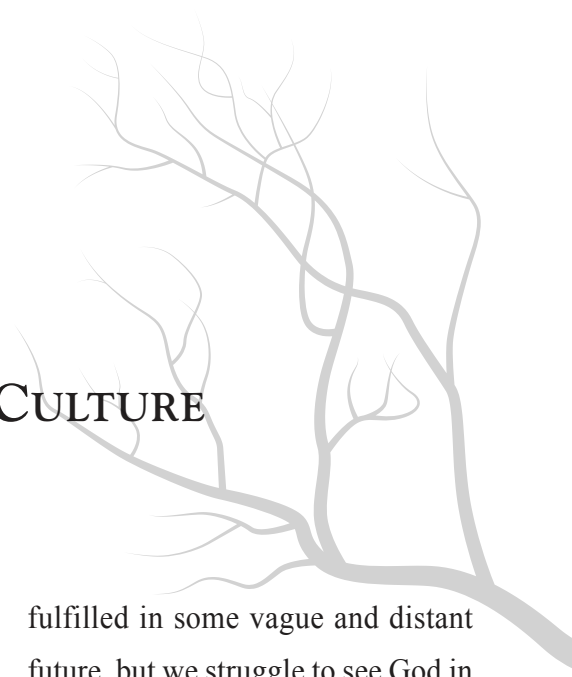
This approach to life opens you up, fills you with wonder.

In this way, acting and egg hunts can teach us about the gospel. Often, we think of the gospel as something past or future tense, something that was or will be, that happened a long, long time ago to be

fulfilled in some vague and distant future, but we struggle to see God in the present. The result? God feels distant, hazy, academic.

What if we approached God differently?

What if instead of going about our days on autopilot, instead of passively hearing and seeing, we actively listened and observed? What if we searched for God the way an actor might search for a character or the way a child may search for an egg? Imagine finding God amongst low soils and high branches. How the world would open up and reveal itself anew. And imagine the excitement day after day as we proclaim that Easter promise again and again—he is present here in the world; he is risen indeed! ●



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Sunday Morning Worship Service

9 a.m. & 11 a.m.

