



March 2011

themessengerbell

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“Finding God in the Wilderness: Praying with the Psalms”

Wilderness. What comes to your mind when you hear that word?

Beauty. Solitude. Peace. Nature. Wilderness can be a place of refuge from the stress of civilization. For many of us, it is a place to meet God in the stark simplicity of creation.

On the other hand, wilderness can also be unsettling. Loneliness. Lack of shelter and comfort. Danger. Wild animals. Storms. Darkness.

Lent is a season of spiritual wilderness. It is a season of prayer. It is a season when we adopt new disciplines, to strengthen ourselves to face the rigors of temptation, wilderness, and the unknown.

Our Lenten theme this year is “Finding God in the Wilderness.” Adam and Eve, Moses and Miriam, Abraham and Sarah, and Jesus himself found God in wilderness places.

When other sources of comfort are stripped away, we never lose our connection with God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said the Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible.

We invite you in this season from Mar. 9 to Apr. 24 to pray with the psalms. We invite you to deepen your spiritual life through a book study of Barbara Brown Taylor’s “An Altar in the World.” We invite you to pray around the cross with the new art installation created by our Sanctuary Art Guild. We invite you to arrive for worship five minutes early each Sunday, to sing a Taize chant. We invite you to spend time in silence; to sign up to pray with a Prayer Partner; and to listen closely to Handel’s “Messiah.”

We invite you to read the Psalms daily. You will find God, even in the wilderness places of your life.

In Christian love,
Julie R. Harley

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Transitions

Baptisms:	<i>Charlotte Elizabeth Berg, Lillian Rose Berg, Violet Marie Berg, daughters of Colleen and Scott</i>
Compassion:	<i>Peggi Mizen Ralph Heinrichs Marion Hill Lucille Beaulieu Mary Anne Meyer Chris Beckwith Aunt of Shannon Leveridge Ed Scheck</i>

Transitions continued>

Transitions *continued*>

Condolence: *Henry Krefft*
Mother of Kathy Russell
Nephew of Kathy Russell
Sister of Sylvia Menninga
Gregg Lyman, son of Rev. Ross Lyman

Celebration: *Jeremy Sebesta* has returned home from serving in Iraq. Jeremy, your church is so glad for your safety and thankful for your service.

Worship in March: The Season of Lent Begins

Mar. 6 **Transfiguration – Communion Sunday**
Kickoff for One Great Hour of Sharing Offering
Exodus 24:12-18 and Matthew 17:1-9
“We Do Not Stand On Our Own”

Wednesday, Mar. 9 – Ash Wednesday service at 7:00 pm in the sanctuary
Ashes will be placed on people’s foreheads or hands –
Communion will be served
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 and 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
“Lessons from a Korean Spa”

Mar. 13 **First Sunday in Lent**
Psalms 32 and Matthew 4:1-11
“Finding Divine Forgiveness”

Mar. 20 **Second Sunday in Lent**
Psalms 121 and John 3:1-17
“Finding Divine Protection”

Mar. 27 **Third Sunday in Lent**
Choir Cantata – Excerpts from Handel’s “Messiah”

Prayer Partners – Lent 2011

—Rob Leveridge

Children, youth and adults, First United members and newcomers alike, are invited to sign up to be prayer partners during Lent this spring! From Ash Wednesday, Mar. 9, through Easter Sunday, Apr. 24, participants will covenant to be in touch each week with their partners, sharing joys and concerns with one another, and lifting them in prayer. This is a wonderful way to get to know people in the faith family, and to receive great spiritual nourishment. You can sign up by submitting the cards you’ll see in church, or by emailing me at rleveridge@firstunitedoakpark.com.

Update from Jeff Foels

Jeff Foels was our McCormick Seminary intern in 2009-10 and graduated last June. He has been engaged in Clinical Pastoral Education in Minneapolis and pursuing ordination. Jeff was recently called as the Director for Youth Ministry at The House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul. He will work full-time in middle and high school ministry with some general ministry responsibilities. We wish him well in this next step of his ministry!



It's One Great Hour of Sharing Time

—Marcia Ashton

On Sunday, March 27, children, youth and adults will join together to support of One Great Hour of Sharing. With this offering we become an essential partner in the refugee, disaster relief and community development efforts of the UCC and Presbyterian Church. Through this ecumenical fund, we reach out to serve people in need in the U.S. and over 80 countries throughout the world. Here is a story of how one person was assisted following the devastating floods in Pakistan. "The loss remains incomprehensible, especially for those who repeatedly witnessed a series of hardships over the past decade, including floods, earthquakes and civil conflict," noted Church World Service/Pakistan staff.

Mehr Nisar, a 50-year-old widow from Punda Balla Village, shared her story of loss. "I lost my husband in the earthquake, and I was living in a (pre-fabricated) shelter with my son after that. This has now been destroyed as half of the land under the shelter was washed away."

There are many more stories like Mehr Nisar's, but because of OGHS gifts and others from the international community, last year, Church World Service staff distributed 16,540 food packages for the benefit of 91,200 individuals. Temporary shelter supplies, household goods, medical supplies and 500 tents were also made available.

Please be generous with your OGHS offering that will change lives around the world.

First United Flies to DC!

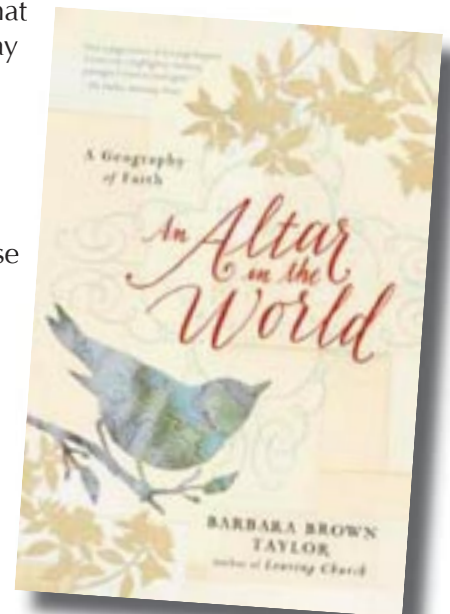
—Leah Fowler

Eight members of First United will attend Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington, DC March 25-28. Six of them are young adult students or recent grads. We will spend the weekend learning more about the theme, "Development, Security and Economic Justice: What's Gender Got To Do With It?" We will look at domestic and international issues, and have special workshops on Colombia. We will fill our last day with face-to-face meetings with our U.S. Senators and Representatives. This is a powerful opportunity for progressive Christians to work ecumenically to further God's call for justice in our world. Please pray for those attending: Stacy Vojta, David Gilmer, Nick Stracco, Katie Villa, Grace Jolicoeur, Andrew DeJong, Ruth McBeth, Bob Haisman and Chase Gentile.

Lenten Reading Groups

This spring we will read and discuss the book, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, in small groups that meet in homes and in our church building. There will be a Monday night group, a Wednesday night group, a Thursday night group, and a Sunday morning group. The gatherings will happen for the six weeks of Lent, from the week of March 14 through the week prior to Easter, which is April 24. If you would like to join one of the groups, you can sign up in the church lounge or email Pastor Rob at rleveridge@firstunitedoakpark.com. You can purchase a copy of the book from Pastor Rob, or on your own. We encourage patronage of our local independent bookstore, The Book Table, at 875 Lake Street. They will have copies.

An Altar in the World is a book about encountering God beyond the four walls of a church building and in experiences outside of Sunday morning church services. Describing spiritual practices as basic as walking, carrying water, choosing Sabbath, being with other people, and saying blessings, Taylor calls conventional distinctions between the sacred and the secular into question. Delving into darker practices of getting lost, falling ill, feeling pain, and grieving loss, she challenges the notion that God does God's best work in the light. Throughout this richly personal narrative, she suggests that no physical act is too earthbound to become a path to the divine. The world is full of altars, she says, for those willing to welcome the truth that comes to them in the flesh.



Welcome Juan!

—Elan Long

We are delighted to announce that Juan Diaz joined our staff full-time as a Lead Custodian in February. Juan began working at First United part-time last year. If you've met Juan, you know how calm, steady and helpful he is. What you might not know is that he has an unusually wide range of skills -- a big plus when it comes to keeping our facilities operating efficiently and up to standards required for all of the various activities we host.

In addition to his experience working in churches and schools, Juan is even a certified boiler repairman—a valuable skill at First United! Juan lives in Berwyn and came to us from Loyola Academy. Patrick and Juan both report to Judith Loevy, Operations Manager. Please be sure to introduce yourself to Juan and welcome him to his new role at First United. We're delighted to welcome him to the First United family.

Worship is not a spectator sport

—Julie R. Harley

We want everyone in our sanctuary to be engaged and involved in worship and focused on God. Worship is only one hour a week, and we want to minimize distractions and maintain a spiritual focus.

Please place cell phones on silent to minimize distractions. If you arrive late, we'd prefer people to enter the sanctuary during a hymn.

Some people like to go within themselves and have quiet time with God, which is why we include silence in every worship service. Some people like to interact with others to experience God's love, which is why we encourage you to shake hands with people when we pass the peace of Christ.

When a worship leader says Amen at the end of a prayer or a sermon, we would like the whole congregation to repeat the word "AMEN" in response. The word Amen means "may it be so."

Applause is a controversial topic, but in general worship is not a performance, so applause is not necessary. God is our audience in worship, and whatever we do, we do to praise God. However, if the Holy Spirit moves you to respond, we encourage you to say Amen.

After the worship leader reads scripture, he or she says, "The Word of the Lord." We like the congregation to respond by saying, "Thanks be to God!"

We're serious about the power of prayer, so if you have a joy or concern to share, please write it on a pink card (in the pew racks) and place it in the offering. We will pray for those concerns during Prayers of the People and throughout the week.

When Offertory is listed in the bulletin, this is the time when we collect money. We gladly receive cash and checks made out to First United, and soon we'll have forms available in the pews so that you can donate by credit card.

You'll notice a lot of people (including the pastors and the choir!) don't put anything in the offering plate when it comes around. This doesn't mean we don't give! It often means that many of us use automatic withdrawal from our checking accounts to pay our pledge, or we have our pledges charged to our credit cards. Or you can mail in your check during the week, or pre-pay your whole pledge once a year. Giving is a sacred act of worship.

Finally, when I say, "God is good," I would like you to say: "All the time!" Then I'll say, "All the time," and I hope you'll respond: "God is good!"





Youth Ministry:

—Leah Fowler

FUSH First United Senior High (9-12 grades) 6 pm Sundays, unless otherwise noted.

Friday, March 4 is our Lock-In! Come to the church at 8 pm; leave at 8 am Saturday!

Sunday, March 13: Youth Summit! FUSH is inviting neighboring youth groups to join for a sharing of favorite group-building games, dance moves and to collect back-packs for PADS.

Sunday, March 20: Girls and Guys Night Out! Bring \$10 for a night of bonding with your gender group.

Sunday, March 27: No FUSH – Spring Break

FUJI First United Junior High (7-8 grades) 6 pm Sundays, unless otherwise noted.

March 6: What do I need to know about drugs and alcohol? Guest speaker John Williams from OPRF Youth Services will tell you!

March 12-13: Our Whole Lives (OWL) Youth Sexuality Training Lock-In at the Church

March 20: Back-Pack Project: Bring a gently used back-pack to FUJI to donate to PADS. We'll have a PADS speaker with us.

March 27: No FUSH (Spring Break)

Adult Education

—Leah Fowler

Sunday Morning Classes at 9:30 am:

Bible Study Explore scripture and teachings on key issues of faith, and become a theologian in the process! This class is ongoing and uses the Living the Questions curriculum. You may join at any time. (Conference Room)

3/6 and 3/13: A Celebration of Church Hymns with Phil Gehring: In this participatory workshop—you be expected to sing!—you will explore beloved church music through history with Phil Gehring, a career Lutheran church musician. Phil and his wife Betty are the third and eldest generation of the Gehring Miller family in this church, and the most recent to join! Meet in Centennial Hall.

3/6, 3/13, and 3/20: Back in Control: *How to Stay Sane, Productive and Inspired in Your Career Transition*—Diane Grimard Wilson, who wrote a book by the same title, comes to First United to give practical and motivating advice to anyone dealing with job loss, transition from one job to another, changing of career, or long term unemployment. Meet in the Chapel.

3/20: Gardening and God: This series from last year picks up again, meeting the Third Sunday of the month. Get ready for Spring planting, think about sustainability, share ideas and build community. Meet in the Library.

3/27: Discerning and Calculating- How does God call you to give financially and of your time in the church? Pastor Rob Leveridge will teach and lead discussion (Chapel).

UP! Bible Study meets Thursday night at 8pm, March 10, at the home of Jackie and Paula Zdziarski-West, 328 S. Harvey Ave. RSVP with Jackie, jmzw@att.net.

Dinner and a Movie Friday, March 4, Showing "Get Low"

—Julie R. Harley

This comedy/drama is based on the true story of a reclusive man in Tennessee who planned his own funeral...and held it while he was still alive! Rated PG-13, "Get Low" stars Robert Duvall and Sissy Spacek. Dinner is at 6:00 pm (\$5 per person) and the movie begins at 6:30 pm in the lounge. Sign up on the elder's desk.

Church Library

—Terry McIntyre

In April, 2007, the Ed and Carole Bergstraesser Library was dedicated at First United Church. It's a remarkably tasteful and comfortable space, an unusually well-stocked and carefully maintained church library, and a wonderful gift honoring the Bergstraessers.

Carole told me that Ed smiled when he remarked how much he saw me in there. Since the library opened, I've gone to use the resources to update my teaching materials for a course in Religions of the World, sometimes for the quiet to grade papers. It's a help to read theology generally and specifically; I also stop by to see what new books are displayed, to refresh my knowledge of denominations and church history, to check what's new in the PFLAG section...and, sometimes, to read periodicals for information and relaxation.

Why share this? To encourage all members to see the wealth of varied resources, to admire the beauty of the surroundings, to meet for quiet conversation, to learn and grow in faith, to see what the Council and church leadership is reading, to share a book with a child, perhaps to sit quietly at the table or in a comfortable chair to meditate, pray. It is the best church library that I've yet to find. Hope you'll think so, too.

Music At First

—Elaine Pierce

Traveling through Lent, from Ash Wednesday to Easter, take the time for a complete performance of Handel's towering tribute to the life of Christ, **The Messiah**—performed with professional soloists, period-instrument orchestra, and the chamber choral ensemble City Voices. Part One, most frequently heard every Dec., tells the Advent and Christmas stories. But the lesser-known second and third parts, telling of Christ's passion and resurrection, are equal in beauty. Attend the pre-concert talk at 6:45 pm in the chapel. This performance is conducted by Music At First Artistic Director William Chin. For information call Bill Chin at 708-386-5215, ext. 39. Saturday, Mar. 19, 2011, 7:30pm Adults \$20, seniors/students \$15, families \$50.



Carbon Fast—What Is It?

—Hilda Fischer

"Equipping people of faith to challenge consumerism, live justly and create meaningful celebrations" from Alternatives to Simple Living- one of the sponsors of the Lenten fast. Join with others throughout the U.S. in an Ecumenical Lenten observation (a UCC initiative). Beginning Mar. 9, and continuing throughout Lent, participants will receive a daily email with the day's suggested carbon-reducing activity. When possible, a quantitative measure of the carbon reduction resulting from the activity will be included. Each daily email will also have a section suggesting a weekly congregational focus. To participate, register at:
<http://visitor.r20.constantcontact.com/d.jsp?llr=lawauneab&p=oi&m=1104263796747>

Join First United Evening Division Thursday, Mar. 3, 2011

—Joanne Desportes

Dinner at 6:30pm is \$15.00. All are welcome. Reservations required.

Contact Ruth Ashman at 708-366-3689 to make a reservation.

Program at 7:30pm: Domestic Violence and KAN-WIN. No reservations required.

KAN-WIN (Korean American Women in Need) provides comprehensive services to Asian American women and children affected by Domestic Violence and also works in the larger community to empower women and create positive social change. Speakers EunJin Kim and Jihye Kim will explore this serious social issue.



peace
prayers

Prayers
for Peace
On the front
steps of the
church every
Friday evening
at 7pm

InnerPeace
WorldPeace
Saturday at
8:30 am, in the
Conference
Room

All are invited.



Leadership and Education Workshops for Lay Leaders, Sat., Mar. 5

The Presbytery of Chicago hosts a LEAD workshop at First Presbyterian Church in Glen Ellyn from 8 am to 3 pm on Sat., Mar. 5. Several national staff members will be here to present workshops on "A Firm Foundation in the Midst of Chaos." Look for brochures at church or visit <http://mccormick.edu/LEAD>

Thank God for our 2010 Pledge Results

—Ken Honderich

A total of 283 pledges for \$678,969 were made in 2010. The budget counted on 95% of this amount but 96% was actually received so we were able to do more than we had projected. Thanks to you for sharing the blessings you received from God. Jesus taught, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." It is easy to incorrectly reverse this and say, "Where your heart is, there will be your treasure." This makes sense to us since we usually spend our dollars satisfying our desires. Jesus did not say that!

His was an encouragement to give and spend where you want your heart to be. Don't just give to those things you care about. Give to those things you want to care about. Then let your heart catch up. Ask yourself, "If I were the sort of person I want to be, what would I do?" Want to care more about the car you drive or the clothes you wear? Spend more money on them. But if you want your faith to grow, invest in your worship community. Put your treasure where you want your heart to be. Your heart will catch up.

2011 Pledge Campaign Update

—Joanne Despotos

Once again, despite a difficult economy, members and friends of First United have stepped up and made pledges for 2011 that have allowed the Council to balance the budget. Thank you for helping First United live God's vision.

In 2011 (so far) we have received 277 pledges totaling \$672,230.00. The largest annual pledge is \$30,000 and the smallest is \$5.00. The average annual pledge is \$2,426.82 or just over \$46.00 per week. This is an increase from last year. We are deeply grateful for each and every one of these pledges. Without them we cannot function because we cannot plan.

The Stewardship Committee hopes that by 2015 at least 9 out of 10 church members will be making a pledge to the annual budget. We can do this! A pledge is an estimate of giving and ANY size pledge is celebrated. We encourage you to estimate the amount you expect to give and formalize it as a pledge. Do you plan to give \$1.00 a week, \$10.00 a week, \$100.00 a month? If so and you haven't let us know, please contact Julie O'Shea at church (708-386-5215).

Memorial Gifts

—Marcia Ashton

First United Church welcomes gifts to the church in memory of loved ones. As families consider funeral arrangements, they often request that friends make charitable gifts instead of sending flowers to honor their loved one. For many, their church was central to their faith, their values, and their life's purpose. A memorial gift to the church may be a meaningful way to honor the faithful life of a beloved person.

Memorial gifts are often used to meet general church needs, which vary year to year. However, family members may wish to discuss with Rev. Julie Harley the possibility of directing a specific gift to the church. One example of a special gift is the beautiful labyrinth in our church yard that was funded with gifts in memory of Janet Hegwood, wife of Raleigh Hegwood. Every gift is valued, whether it is large or small. Last year the church gratefully received gifts in memory of Beth Drews, Bobbi Isserman, Eugene Kearley, Suzanne Keller, Betty Miller, Ida and Anne Robinson, and Glenn Toppen.

For more information about planned giving at First United Church, please contact Rev. Julie Harley at 708-386-5215 or rjh@firstunitedoakpark.com or Gene Armstrong, Planned Giving Committee Chair, at 708-524-0381 or geneann1113@yahoo.com.

PrimeTime – Dinner for Eight

—Marcia Ashton

Small dinner parties - Saturday, March 26 from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm, PrimeTime folks will scatter to five different homes for dinner and warm conversation. Each host will prepare the main dish inspired by a "comfort food" theme; guests will be assigned to bring appetizers, salad, dessert and wine. The RSVP date is March 16 to Anna Sadowski annasadowski@gmail.com or 708-386-7896. This event is limited to 40 people so act quickly to make your reservation.

Thank You Thank You Thank You!

Thanks from Gift Recipients

—Sher Watts Spooner

For 10 years now, many people from First United have sponsored families and individuals from the Holiday Food and Gift Basket Sponsor-a-Family program, more than 100 people each year. Afterward, the organization always forwards me some thank-you notes. But this year, the notes were especially moving. They show the extent of the effect of the economic recession, but they also show the strength of the Christian spirit. Here's a sample:

"I want to thank all those who gave me and my boys gifts for Christmas. Without you all my kids wouldn't have anything for Christmas. ...For the past two years I have not been working. I've been looking for employment but I have not been having luck."

"We at the Heritage House [housing for low-income elderly are blessed people. Keep up the good work and thank you so very much. God bless."

"I loved the cards you sent also. They were the only Christmas cards I got this year."

"Thank you thank you thank you for all my Christmas gifts. Your generosity overwhelmed me. I cried more with each package I unwrapped. How someone can be so generous is unbelievable. I shared some of my gifts with my neighbors. There was so much. Where I saw a need I asked if they could use a tray, quilt or one of the other items. You made so many people's lives better."

"Your kindness and generosity touch my heart deeply!! When I am able to, I will adopt a family for Christmas as you did for my daughter and I. Returning to the community/world the kindness, thoughtfulness and caring heart that you have given to my daughter and I! Thank you for caring."

With Deepest Gratitude...

—Bud and Susan Meyers

With deepest gratitude for the prayers, the care, the kindnesses and the assistances we've received from our First United family during the last two months. Thank you Pastors Julie, Leah, and Rob, Marylen, Bob Berry and all the Deacons, the Prayer Shawl Ministry, the women of Evening Division and the Women's Retreat, the Church School Third Graders, and all of you angels who have been in touch with visits, cards, notes, e-mails, phone calls and thoughts.

We are humbled, uplifted and most of all, enfolded in God's loving care and your. Our cup runneth over. Thank you.



Save these dates

Thursday, March 3	6:30p	Evening Division Dinner
Friday, March 4	6:00p	Dinner and a Movie
	8:00p	FUSH Lock-in
Wednesday, March 9	7:00p	Ash Wednesday Worship Service Communion and Ashes
Thursday, March 10	8:00p	Up! Bible Study
Sunday, March 13	8:30a	Church School Leader Breakfast
Tuesday, March 15	7:30p	Church Council
Saturday, March 19	7:30p	Messiah Concert
Saturday, March 26	6:00p	PrimeTime Dinners for Eight
Sunday, March 27	11:00a	One Great Hour of Sharing Offering

To see additional First United Church events go to our website calendar

www.firstunitedoakpark.com

FIRST UNITED CHURCH *of Oak Park*

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Marylen Marty-Gentile, Director of
Children & Family Ministries

Bill Chin, Director of Music Ministry

Cathryn Wilkinson, Organist

**The April Messenger Bell
deadline is March 15**
Please limit all articles to
250 words or less.
Thank you.

Please e-mail information
or articles for the MB to:

office@firstunitedoakpark.com