



# CROSS OF GRACE NEWS

**December 2023**



## **Let's Talk Christmas (and Advent)**

“The war on Christmas” is something that we have heard of for the past decade or two, and while I am often one to roll my eyes at the accusations that Starbucks or Target have some big nefarious plans to overthrow the second holiest day of the year (Easter is #1 for Christians), I will say that American Christmas has definitely become a separate holiday from the Christian Holiday we celebrate as Christians. While I do think this shift has been part of our culture’s focus on consumerism and profit margins, I do not see any one business or organization to blame. Rather, I think it is part of the continued growth of the fastest growing religion in America – Materialism.

Years ago, we celebrated Christmas with our blend of European non-Christian traditions that were folded into the celebration of Christ’s birth. The Church, rather than ruling out the local pagan celebrations, repurposed the traditions to make them their own – this is why we still celebrate Christmas around a decorated evergreen tree and celebrate the holiday less than a week after the winter solstice. These were ways that our Christian tradition tried to honor the heart of traditions that mattered to communities while still focusing on Christ as the central figure of the holiday.

However, in the past hundred years or so, Christmas has taken an entirely new turn, and that is one where Christ is no longer the center, and a jolly arctic Caucasian reverse-burglar in red has become the central figure of this celebration of material. About a century ago, Coca-Cola advertised Santa in their traditional Coca-Cola red, and ever since that moment, Santa Claus’s appearance and outfit have been cemented in our American zeitgeist. There is nothing inherently bad about Santa, he is based off of one of the earliest Church Fathers that was known for his charity to children (and also hitting a heretic in the face at a major Church Council meeting). However, the man in red today that we see seems to be more concerned with the quantity of gifts rather than the reason why we exchange them in the firstplace – because we as Lutheran Christians believe that the arrival of God, Jesus Christ’s birth, is the greatest gift the world has received.

Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, American Christmas had become entirely conflated with Christian Christmas, and as time went on, American Christmas overshadowed the Christian celebration more and more. So this December, I would like to invite you to celebrate Advent and Christmas in a new, or dare I say, more traditional way.

1. While we may need the lights and joy to endure the darkest nights of the year (seasonal depression is real y'all!), let us remember that **Christmas does not actually begin until December 25th**, which according to the ancient tradition starts at sun down on Dec. 24, and it lasts twelve full days until January 5th (with Epiphany, the arrival of the Magi, being January 6th). This does not mean that we need to be confrontational or combative about the difference in celebrations, but I think there is a benefit to waiting until the day itself rather than continually bumping the celebrations beginning earlier and earlier (how soon until the Christmas season starts to supplant Halloween).

2. **Take the time to celebrate Advent!** Advent marks the beginning of the Christian New Year, and it is a season of preparation as we await Christ's arrival. The Christian season leading up to Christmas is an entire season about anticipation, of awaiting something that has not yet come. Rather than rushing past this season of arrival and anticipation, let us slow down and take the time to appreciate the slow building crescendo that takes place during Advent. This Advent Cross of Grace will be meeting for weekly worship every Wednesday at 7pm at St. Timothy's-in-the-Valley.

3. **Ponder the Incarnation** – One of the most incredible mysteries of the Christian tradition is the Incarnation, God entering into this world. The mystery of Christ's arrival and the two natures of God (Fully God and Fully Human), are a wealth of understanding that Christians would do well to study. Some years ago, I was introduced to St. Athanasius' seminal work *On the Incarnation* (<https://tinyurl.com/TheIncarnation>). This brief, but incredibly rich theology book is perhaps Christianity's greatest piece of literature pondering the details of what it means for God to enter into this broken world we live in. This Advent, I'd invite you to join us for our **9am Saturday morning study at Panera in Teays Valley on Dec. 2, 9, 16, and 23rd, as we will be reading On the Incarnation with one another**. You are welcome to read it on your own, but given the depth of the theology, I think it will be fruitful for us to read parts of it together in person and reflect on it, much like we do with Bible Study during Sunday School.

4. **In Addition to Charity, also Seek Justice** - Christmas is a time when the outpouring of charity is incredible! I can honestly say that Christmastime (both American and Christian), is one of incredible charity – gifts that have a profound impact on individuals and families. However, we as Christians are also called to be part of greater solutions to systemic problems too. While these problems may seem insurmountable at times, we would be wise to consider the words of St. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (he's a saint in my book): "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself." Recently we have seen a rise in **both** anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim rhetoric due to the War in Gaza, and we have also recently seen an entire community in Charleston, Charleston's largest, most diverse, and also the poorest community, be deprived of water, gas, and pertinent information. This Advent and Christmas, let us take the time to pray for and ponder ways that we as a small Church in Teays Valley can have an impact on bigger issues of injustice. While we may not be able to have an

immediate impact here and now on these issues, by taking the time to pray and ponder, we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit's guidance, and we may discern future ministries of Cross of Grace in the process.

Christmas has always been a time of great joy for me, but I can honestly say that over the years, the American celebration has overtaken and obscured the heart of this holy seasons, at least for me it has, and I'd urge you as Christians to take the time to celebrate the heart of this holy time together. Because as long as we seek out Christ and seek to be more like Christ, God will be glorified this American Christmas, Advent, and all twelve days of Christmas.

Grace and Peace,  
-Pr. Darick J. Biondi



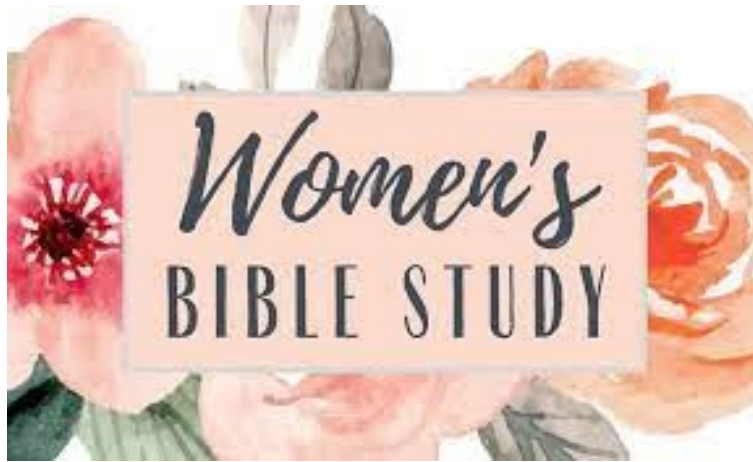
The ladies of COG will have their annual Christmas Party and Mystery gift exchange on December 2 at 11:00 AM at the Fireside Grille in Teays Valley.

All women in the congregation are invited to attend.

Everyone should bring a gift suitable for anyone for Mystery Gift Exchange.

Come and enjoy some good food, fun and games and a Christmas Craft.

Please let Ellen Bragg know if you plan on attending to ensure enough materials for the crafts are on hand.



All ladies are welcome to join in the Women's Bible Study on Wednesday, December 13th at 10:00am at Tudors on Rt. 60 in St. Albans.



We will be providing a meal for the Rock Ministries on December 11th.

If you would like to provide food for the meal, money to assist in purchasing food for the meal or to help with this awesome ministry, please reach out to Susan Santrock.

Last month we were able to provide a meal to 25 men who are currently in recovery thanks to the generosity of our amazing congregation!



## COLLEGE CARE PACKAGES

College Care Packages were sent to Noah Peters and Kaleigh Goff.

A total of \$150 in gift cards along with some chocolate chip cookies and a card with a note of encouragement were sent to these college students thanks to the kind hearts and generosity of our awesome congregation!

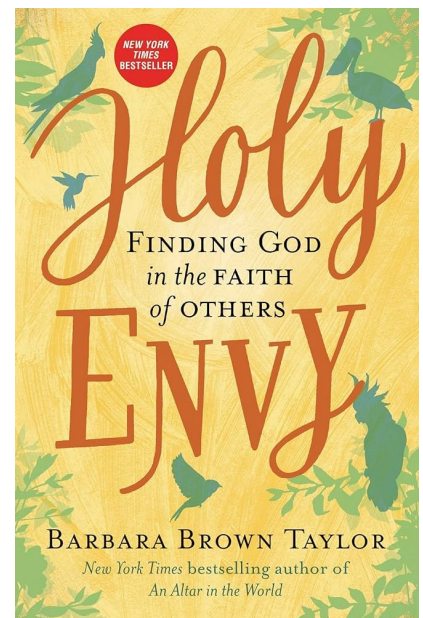


Due to the busy upcoming season of Advent and Christmas, we will be not have a Movie Night in December!

But, never fear! We will return to our fun nights of fellowship, food and good movies in 2024!

Our next book study, which will begin on January 6, 2024, will be on Holy Envy, by Barbara Brown Taylor.

See Mike Kutz to get on the list for book order for this book study.



# PRAYER CHAIN



Cross of Grace has a prayer chain. This is a group of people that have volunteered to add people's prayer requests to their routine prayers.

A person with a prayer request contacts

Ellen Bragg who is the first contact on the prayer chain and then the need is passed down the chain with Ellen calling the next person and then that person passes the need along to the next person in the chain.

The church prayer chain is alive and well and looking for more members as well as people to pray for. If you have a prayer need please call Ellen Bragg at 304-590-0811.

She is the beginning of the prayer chain and will pass along the prayer request. If you would like to join the prayer chain please drop a note in the collection plate with your name and phone number so that she can add you to the prayer chain.

The current Prayer Chain is:

Ellen Bragg  
Debbie Goff  
Rose Mary Kutz  
Rosa McKinney  
Mary Baker

If you need to contact someone on the prayer chain please use the directory for their contact information.



## Card Ministry

We have a thriving card ministry that attempts to send a card and recognize important Anniversaries in members of our congregation's lives. If you want to be included in this ministry please return the following information by placing it in the collection plate.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_

Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Birthday: \_\_\_\_\_

Baptism Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Wedding Anniversary Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_



Wednesday Advent Services will be held at St. Timothy's-in- the-Valley Episcopal Church on December 6, 13, and 20 at 7pm.

We are very grateful to St. Timothy for allowing us to use their space for both Advent and Christmas this year!

This year, our focus will be “Pause, Prepare, Ponder” and we will be teaming up with St. Paul Lutheran in Huntington and Trinity Lutheran in Charleston. We will be rotating pastors each week so that each church has an opportunity to hear the proclaimed word from Pr. Randy Richardson, Pr. Kevin Mackey, and Pr. Darick too! The service will consist of a simple liturgy to mark the season and to await the coming king.

**Note: this year there will not be a meal prior to worship, we have asked much of our cooks over the recent months, and so this Advent, we will take a break from this tradition.**



Sunday, December 24th

10:30am at the Hampton Inn—Service of Lessons & Carols

7:00pm at St. Timothy's-in-the-Valley - Christmas Eve Worship





All events listed are Free!

Yuletide in the Park Tree Lighting – Dec. 1<sup>st</sup> at 5pm at Valley Park

Hurricane Christmas Parade – Dec. 9<sup>th</sup> at noon

Handel's Messiah – Dec. 16 at 7pm at the Clay Center (there are free tickets available to those interested—contact Pr. Darick for more information!)

## How To Share Information

Have information about an upcoming event, a prayer request, or any other news you would like to share with the congregation?

Send it to Lauren anytime at [crossofgracelutheran@gmail.com](mailto:crossofgracelutheran@gmail.com)!

Bear in mind,

The deadline to have it in the weekly email is Friday morning each week.

The deadline for the newsletter is the 20th of every month.