

**Oak Meadow
United Methodist Church**

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Laity Notes

by
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THANKSGIVING

The holiday season rapidly approaches. Thanksgiving is but a few days away and in short order Christmas will arrive. In less than two months we will begin a new year, wondering what happened to 2003. Time seem to go so fast when looking backward, though it might have a different pace while working our way from morning to night. We are rapidly coming to the close of what is known in church terms as Ordinary Time. In short order a new cycle will begin with Advent, which means *arrival* or *coming* and marks the beginning of the Christian year. Christmas is a twelve-day celebration celebrating the birth of Christ. Epiphany begins with the arrival of the three wise men in Bethlehem and is the season which emphasizes the ministry of Jesus. Lent is the season of repentance and begins with Ash Wednesday. Holy week begins with Palm Sunday, which celebrates Jesus' entrance to Jerusalem. Maundy Thursday commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus and His disciples, and Good Friday marks the crucifixion of Jesus. Easter, the central event of the Christian faith, celebrates the resurrection of Christ. Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit, and is followed by Ordinary Time until we return again to Advent. Advent begins this year on November 30.

But first Thanksgiving. For what might we be thankful at Oak Meadow UMC on this Thanksgiving Day? Let us imagine for the moment that a complete stranger came to our

church one Sunday. How many things would they encounter, directly or indirectly, that had been made possible by the serving hands of members of our congregation?

When our imaginary guest got out of their car, the first thing they might notice would be a mowed front lawn. That would be after they had driven by a new MDO sign. They would walk on a freshly cleaned sidewalk to the front door of our church. Once inside they would smell the aroma of fresh coffee and as they looked about they would see nametags identifying every regular member. When they entered the sanctuary, they would be handed a bulletin which was neatly folded, and when they began to look around they would see fresh flowers and burning candles. Taking their seat, they would find a hymnal which would have been set out before they came and will be gathered once they leave. With the first song they would hear our pianist, see our choir director and hear our choir, well practiced from Wednesday night's rehearsal. Sitting down after the hymn, they would hear a children's (or perhaps an adult) mini-sermon followed by lectionary readings. Later in worship, they would watch a couple gather the offering, and if they put a dollar in the plate it later would be counted, deposited and have checks written against it. They would sit in an air conditioned sanctuary because the air conditioner had been repaired. At the end of worship they well might receive a number of hugs. On their way out they could pick up a colorful brochure describing our church and a copy of a directory of members. If they stopped in the bathroom, they would walk on newly laid tile. Once they reached home, they could learn more about our church on our internet site.

"Let my people go, that they may serve me." This is what the LORD told Moses to say to the Pharaoh in Egypt. Each detail in the paragraph above describes a consequence of an act of service by the hands of members of our congregation which would be felt by a guest visiting our church. Each of these consequences is also felt by each one of us on every Sunday. We have much to be thankful for at Oak Meadow UMC. Let us be quick to thank and slow to complain.

ONE YEAR AGO

One year ago our church was, if not broke, then badly bent. More than once in 2002 we could

not make pastoral payroll on a timely basis. We were giving serious consideration to the prospect of merging with University UMC and giving up our independent status. Financial strain was an important cause leading to that consideration. We were slowly beginning to wake from a deep slumber.

Today we have straightened considerably. As a result of great generosity on the part of many, our church debt will be retired by the end of this year. Annual debt payments of \$14,472 will be removed from our budget, making room for apportionment payments and leaving some left over. Though we still have far to go, when compared to 2002, committee activity in 2003 was lively. A game night has been instituted on Wednesday evenings. There were a number of Wednesday evening meals which drew us and guests into our church. There were a number of after-church potluck meals which did the same. Mother's Day Out children are being ministered to by our pastor on a regular basis. On Psalm Sunday the MDO children along with many of their parents graced our church. A full-scale budget for MDO will be presented to the finance committee today, to my knowledge the first time that has ever been done. Our church budget for 2004 will also be presented to the finance committee tomorrow, and for the first time in recent memory budgeted expenditures will dip under \$100,000. We have a new church directory and nametags for regular members. We have a new person to care for children during worship service, and we are seeing new faces nearly every Sunday. We have not yet discovered a way to keep those new faces, but at least we are seeing new ones. It is a fertile ground with which to begin.

In September we celebrated our 25th anniversary and are slowly laying the groundwork for the next 25. Our anniversary celebration was followed by another successful Fall Festival which netted close to \$4,000 for our church coffers. The success of our Fall Festival was the result of careful planning and considerable hard work. Lottery winners reaped a water color painting and a stained glass art piece, both of which were created and donated by members of our congregation.

We will have our annual church conference on November 30 and every attending church member will be entitled to vote in the proceedings which will include adoption of our

2004 budget and confirmation of committee membership among other things. Let this be the beginning of an even more fruitful year than the one just past.

PRAYING THE PSALMS

In her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris writes of praying the psalms at a critical juncture in her life: "My husband once went into a depression so severe that he had to be hospitalized for several weeks. I was stunned to learn that we had no medical insurance—in his descent into despair he had canceled it—but I also comprehended that this was the least of our problems. Finding out who my husband was, who I was, and rebuilding our life together; those were the critical things. One day at the height of the crisis I was talking to a friend in New York City, who asked, 'What are you doing for yourself? Are you seeing a counselor? Did you get someone to give you a prescription for tranquilizers?' 'No,' I replied, and then I startled myself by saying, 'I'm OK; I've been praying the psalms.' 'And that's enough?' she replied, incredulous." (33)

We have for the past few weeks in Sunday School been reading Biblical passages which show both the breath and the beauty of Scripture. We spent a couple of Sundays on the story of Gideon in Judges 6-8 and last Sunday entered the psalms with a foray into the first and last psalm, psalm 1 and psalm 150. This Sunday we will study psalm 22, a lament psalm. The Psalms compete with portions of Isaiah as some of the ancient world's finest poetry. And, as Kathleen Norris reminds us in another of her books, *The Cloister Walk*, "poetry's function is not to explain but to offer images and stories that resonate with our lives." She continues, "The value of this great songbook of the Bible lies not in the fact that singing praise can alleviate pain but that the painful images we find there are essential for praise, that without them, praise is meaningless." (95)

For those whose hearts are so moved, please join us next Sunday in a study and praying of a psalm of Thanksgiving.

COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Please email comments or suggestions to cjhall_45@yahoo.com or leave a telephone message at 404-1894.