First Church is an Open and Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Christ

Sign up for in-person worship services in December!
Click here for more information

NOW Is The Time!
Stewardship 2021
November 1-December 6
Click here to learn more!

November 29th  First Sunday of Advent
10 a.m. in Sanctuary (also via Virtual Church**)
Rev. George Harris, preaching

December 6th  Second Sunday of Advent
10 a.m. in Sanctuary (also via Virtual Church**)
Rev. Kevin Weikel, preaching

December 13th  Third Sunday of Advent
10 a.m. in Sanctuary (also via Virtual Church**)
Children’s Christmas Pageant

December 20th  Fourth Sunday of Advent
10 a.m. in Sanctuary (also via Virtual Church**)
Rev. George Harris, preaching

December 24th  Christmas Eve
5 p.m: Puppet Pageant via Virtual Church
9 p.m: Lessons and Carols in Sanctuary
11 p.m: Holy Night Worship in Sanctuary
(also via Virtual Church**)

December 27th
Special Online Worship Service provided by the Southern New England Conference of the UCC, "The Long-Awaited Gift"

*subject to change due to changing COVID-19 numbers
** Livestreamed worship will also still be offered via Facebook Live

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Pastor Pondering

What are we waiting for?

When I was a kid, the Advent calendar was always the first of the Christmas paraphernalia to be brought up from the basement, and hung in the front hall where my brothers and I could watch with excited anticipation as we inched ever closer to Christmas Day.

Ours was handmade from fabric, with a green Christmas tree mounted on a white background. Along the bottom, there were twenty-five little pockets, each holding a handcrafted, cloth Christmas ornament. My brothers and I would take turns, each day ceremoniously pinning another ornament to the tree, advancing ever closer to Christmas, when we would all pin the star to the top of our Advent tree together.

Like many Advent calendars, this one wasn’t the least bit religious, and the excitement we felt as children was more about Santa coming than Jesus’ birth. Of course, we had a Nativity scene that we also put up with our Christmas decorations, but it wasn’t until I was an adult that I really contemplated what the season of Advent is all about.

The word Advent comes from a Latin word meaning coming, or arrival, and describes the season of expectant waiting and preparation for the birth of Christ. Now that I am a pastor, I am more grounded in each week’s Advent theme, Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. But the question remains, what are we waiting for?

There are two understandings of what Jesus’ birth represents to us. One is Emmanuel, God with us. The other understanding, distinct from but not contrary to Emmanuel, is Jesus as Messiah, our savior, the one who will deliver us from worldly injustice and suffering.

The COVID-19 pandemic has lent new meaning and depth to our faith in many ways, and I especially feel this as we prepare to enter Advent. At his very moment, our country and our world are experiencing pervasive and traumatic suffering and death, even as a life-saving vaccine is being prepared. Talk about expectant waiting! I wonder if ancient Jews hoped for a Messiah as a “vaccine,” one that would bring a quick end to suffering and death. In our heart of hearts, we may still hope for such a Messiah, but alas, no vaccine, nor even Jesus, will provide that.

Instead, the Jesus we are anticipating and preparing for as this Advent season begins is something even better than a vaccine, a God whose saving action in our lives is to share our common lot, to become flesh, to accompany us and shoulder our burdens, even through pandemics. This Messiah gives our life meaning, affirms our worth, in spite of our shortcomings and failures.

Don’t wait! This Advent, let’s prepare to again receive this Jesus into our lives.

In Christ,
Pastor George
From The Desk of Rev. Kevin Weikel

The Advent/Christmas Debate, 2020 Edition

Growing up in a heavily liturgical church, at least in comparison to First Church, I'll admit to having a bit of Grinch in me this time of year. My preference is to hold on to Advent, to live into the waiting. For me, it is the longing for Christmas Day that makes space for me to be able to reflect with honesty about the places in my life and in the world where Christ's hope, peace, love, and joy are most needed to be born anew.

Don't get me wrong; I love Christmas – a lot. I love Christmas carols and my Aunt Barbara's butterscotch pie. I love putting Lionel trains under the tree and watching them go around like I'm 8 years old. I love how the excitement builds on my kids' faces as Christmas Day nears, and I especially love Christmas Eve at First Church. But still, I find if I jump too quickly into celebration mode, into the bright lights, cookies, and Christmas hymns, I miss out on the full meaning of Christ's birth when it finally arrives on December 25th.

I can already tell that this year, holding onto Advent will be more challenging than ever. With the warmer than typical November and most everyone staying home over Thanksgiving, it seems people are taking the opportunity to put up their Christmas decorations and lights earlier than ever before. Some Evangelical Christians talk about there being a "war on Christmas," but I think the real battle is over Advent...and this year, Advent is ceding even more ground!

Now, my hunch is that people are decorating early not just because of the warmer weather or because they have more time on their hands, but because 2020 has been hard. And I think these people have a point. That's right, this is difficult for me to admit, and it's going to be a challenge for me to do, but I think, this year and just for this year, jumping right to the carols and lights and cheer is the right move, and maybe even necessary.

I don't need to tell you, 2020 has been tough on all of us. COVID has brought so much pain, and when combined with the never-ending election season, let's just say I think we've had our Advent. We've waited long enough.

And so, in the Weikel House this year we are skipping Advent. We're putting up our tree soon after Thanksgiving, and we're pumping the Christmas carols right away. This year, we all need to celebrate the hope, peace, love, and joy in our lives and our world as soon as possible because we've been waiting for too long. And if my Aunt wants to send me a butterscotch pie during Advent, I'll take that, too!

Peace to you,
Kevin
OK....I have a confession to make: I have a “love/hate” relationship with Christmas movies. They appear out of the woodwork every year like elves on the shelf, playing our emotions like stringed instruments...all with similar expositions, developments, and resolutions. The couple that we know are meant to be together find each other; the colonel’s ski resort is saved; an angel gets its wings, Scrooge sees the light, and Santa gets sprung from the hoosegow just in time to deliver that bike. Wow. And I’ve actually been known to shed a tear or two every now or then. But the tears run a little deeper than a simple happy ending.

I am a believer in the bittersweet. The Grinch in me is fully aware that the concept of the “Christmas Miracle” is largely brought on by Hollywood in an effort to entertain us and separate us from our meager bucks. The reality of the situation is that we are set up to believe that, unless some great magic happens, our Christmases are doomed to fall a little flat. We have all had holidays where no miracles have happened. Depression runs deeper during this time for many: everything is amplified: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Some have suffered some significant and devastating losses. We are more open to a myriad of emotions during this season, no matter whether our endings are sad, happy, or meh. And particularly now, when our social interactions are greatly limited, and we’re stuck at home watching these darn movies.

Let me retreat a bit, and put that bucket of cold water away. This really can be a wonderful time of year. For the last Cornerstone I remarked on how the pandemic has given us the gift of appreciation, but there is another gift that we have that is perhaps more appropriate for this time of year – the gift of Opportunity. We have the opportunity to connect in some way, the opportunity to love, to help someone, the opportunity to give and receive, and to get outside of ourselves. Maybe we don’t have two nickels to rub together, but we can look at someone, ask them how they are, and listen to the answer. Instead of writing the Christmas letter about surfing the waves of Tahiti, send a card and say that you have appreciated your time together, or their smile, or their sense of humor, that they mean something to you; and that you’re really looking forward to being able to give them a hug, or buy them a beer. Take a gift given with grace, and say “thank you” and mean it. Our opportunities are a gift given to us; they can be more of a miracle than anything, and more far-reaching that we can imagine.

OK – a little about music. (what did you expect?). In the past I remarked that Christmas Carols are becoming a thing of the past for some, and that many of our kids don’t know any at all. We may not be able to gather to sing them together this year, but I will be sending out recordings of carols with words, an accompaniment by me, and with some of the voices from our congregation. I will invite you to sing along with your family or even by yourself. And, if you have a mind to, listen through headphones or earbuds, record yourself singing, and send your recording to me via email or Google drive or Dropbox. Don’t judge your voice – don’t even listen to it – there isn’t anyone that doesn’t think they sound terrible. But I will combine all the voices and use them for our Christmas services so that we will be singing them as a congregation. And it will be beautiful. Any questions, email me – mmercier@fccsimsbury.org.

Life is not a Hollywood movie. It’s a crapshoot, with no sure thing. Even though we know how it turned out with Joseph and Mary, they weren’t sure whether they were going to make it or not. It was a very real harrowing situation for them, and our situations are every bit as real and unsettling for us. And, yes, it is in fact possible for the lovers to go their separate ways, the ski resort to go belly up, Santa’s not going to make bail, and, sorry, Johnny, that bike just ain’t gonna happen this year. But the bittersweet opens us up. If we prepare, and set a place at the Christmas table and invite God to show up, God will be more apt to come, even though it might not be in the way we hope or expect. God’s still voice isn’t under the tree – it lives in opportunity, appreciation, and love. I pray that all of us have open eyes, ears, and hearts to experience the real miracles. Merry Christmas!

Wishing you Christ’s Peace and Grace - Mark
It’s no secret that each of the holidays have looked a bit different this year. Alright, who are we kidding? They’ve been so different that sometimes they are unrecognizable. But even in the midst of a pandemic we have all been able to find the magic in the holidays and to bring that magic to the children around us. We handed out palms for Palm Sunday in a drive through fashion. Families in Church School surprised one another with Easter Egg hunts in their yards for Easter. Thanksgiving we gathered with smaller family units and visited with our extended families on Zoom or in a socially distanced way.

And now we enter the Season of Advent. So much will be different. Yet we will find ways to bring the magic of the season into our hearts and lives. We will each light a candle for the Sundays in Advent. We will decorate our Christmas trees. We will have a virtual children’s pageant. We will give thanks for the miracle of Jesus’ birth. We will celebrate through the struggles of this past year and give thanks for all that we have.

Isn’t that what Mary and Joseph did? They celebrated the miracle of Mary’s pregnancy even with all the difficulties it brought them. They gave thanks for the lowly stable in which they brought their baby into the world. They saw the miracle that was Jesus’ birth. They all saw the miracle. The Magi, shepherds, angels, and animals… they all gathered to truly appreciate the miracle of Jesus’ birth. Now here we are in 2020, in our small gatherings. Each person among us representing the Magi… the shepherds… the angels… Let us all rejoice in the miracle that is Jesus’ birth. And as we enter into 2021, let us hold on to that miracle and be ready to face all that the new year brings.


Merry Christmas,
Jessica Wolanin

Merry Christmas from my family to yours,
Jessica
If you haven't done so already, THE TIME IS NOW to make your 2021 pledge! Help First Church to continue to shine the light amidst today's uncertainty! The ministries of the church have never been more relevant and needed!

Join the many who have already pledged!

To make your pledge, visit [fcsimsbury.org/stewardship](http://fcsimsbury.org/stewardship), mail in your pledge card, or call the church office at (860)-651-3593
Holiday Happenings at First Church

While this Christmas season may be a little different, we still have some holiday happenings to share with you all! Visit our Holiday Happenings webpage to see a full list of everything we’re doing to stay connected this holiday season!

Covenant to Care Christmas Gift Collection

Covenant to Care Christmas Gifts have been a tradition at First Church for almost 20 years. Our church works directly with social workers whose clients are abused, neglected and impoverished children. Your gifts may be the only ones they receive this Christmas.

Especially in this difficult year, these gifts will be incredibly impactful to these children in need. Please keep an eye on the Weekly email and Holiday Happenings page for an online sign up for this year’s gift donation. More to come!

Luminaries for Loved Ones

This year, in lieu of Poinsettia Sunday, we will be creating a display of luminaries around the outside of the church on Christmas Eve for the church and town community to enjoy. You may purchase a luminary in honor, or in memory of a loved one. We will still be delivering poinsettias to members of our church community who cannot get out to enjoy the Advent season, and displaying some in the Sanctuary during worship.*

We invite all to drive through the church lots to enjoy this spectacular display on Christmas Eve.

*Your donation will offset the cost of the luminary display, cost of decorating the sanctuary with poinsettias, and delivering the poinsettias to the church community.

The cost is $10.00 each. You may send in a check and order form (on back page) to the First Church office with “flower/luminary fund” listed in the memo line, or click the link below to make an online payment. Please choose the flower/luminary fund online donation. The deadline to sign up is Wednesday, December 16th.

Click here to order!
First Church Youth and Young Adults

Junior Fellowship:
Next meeting: Sunday, December 13th

Confirmation:
Monday, December 7, 5:30-7:00 p.m-Meeting 5: Worship
Monday, December 21, 5:30-7:00 p.m-Meeting 6: Advent and Christmas

PF Youth Group:
• Sunday, December 6th: 7-9 p.m.
• Sunday, December 13th: 7-9 p.m.
• Sunday, December 20th: 7-9 p.m.
• Sunday, December 27th: 7-9 p.m.
## Advent Wreath Kits

Do you look forward to creating your Advent Wreath during Fellowship Hour each year? Fear not! We will have Advent Wreath **Take Home Kits available for pick up outside of Palmer Hall from 9-10 on November 29th**. Included in each kit you will be provided with the wire wreath frame, Advent candles, floral wire, as well as a poem to explain how to utilize the Advent Wreath. All you need is greenery to put around your wreath, which you can find in many backyards. Then we hope you will join us via Zoom to decorate our Advent wreaths together at **3:30 pm on November 29th**. Together we will light the first candle of Advent! The **Zoom information is:** Meeting ID: 644 157 1795 Passcode: Advent

## Christmas Cookie Decorating & Fellowship

Each year for the Advent season, the children will gather and decorate cookies. Due to the pandemic, we will be gathering virtually! So bake some cookies ahead of time or pick up some premade ones from the store! Gather your icing and decorations and join us to decorate cookies together via Zoom on December 20th at 3 p.m.! The **Zoom information is:** Meeting ID: 856 7982 1092 Passcode: Cookies

## Virtual Church School Activities!

Be sure to visit the Children’s Ministries page on our website to see new crafts, activities, and video content, including Godly Play and Bible read-alouds with Miss Jessica! Updated weekly.

## Christmas Eve Puppet Pageant - December 24th at 5 p.m.

A wonderful, captivating service for all ages that retells the joyous story of Jesus’ birth using larger-than-life rod puppets. This service is a memorable, long-standing tradition at First Church that the entire family will find meaningful.

This year, due to the pandemic, the Puppet Pageant will be presented virtually at 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve. We have been hard at work on this year’s production, and look forward to sharing it with you!

## Participate in Virtual Worship!

Would you like for your children to be involved in worship? We are looking for children and youth to participate in worship by recording themselves singing a short song, reciting the scripture, or reading the Call to Worship with a sibling or parent. This is super easy to do and we would love to have several families involved. If you are interested in learning more, please email Jessica Wolanin at jwolanin@ffcsimsbury.org. We hope to have as many families as possible participate in worship in the coming weeks!
For All Ages Unite By Light!

Join your neighbors to #UnitebyLight on December 6 when Simsbury will be aglow by candlelight with the spirit of friendship, unity, and community. Purchase your luminary kit on-line at www.forallages.org/unite-by-light and in person at Fitzgerald’s on 11/14, 11/21, and 12/4.

And sign up today to help bring the Simsbury Unity Mile - a one mile stretch along Hopmeadow St. (beginning at First Church) lit by more than 1,000 luminaries – to life. This is an outdoor, socially-distanced volunteer opportunity. Sign up today at www.forallages.org/unite-by-light.

CARE BAGS CONTINUE

After several long months of disruption from Covid protocols, Care Bags is finally back in business and recently delivered 84 emergency removal bags to DCF (Dept of Children & Families) in Hartford. As understandable, the need is greater than ever to help vulnerable children caught in today’s horrible stresses.

We (usually) deliver monthly bags for infants through teens that have come into foster care under emergency circumstances. Each bag has toiletries, clothing, blanket, book, snacks, & toys. Donations or helpers are always appreciated!

Contact: Becky Goss. ocbeckyct@comcast.net 860-559-0621

For All Ages Unite By Light!
You Don’t Have to Be in the Choir to Be in the Choir!!

You might have noticed, either attending on Sunday mornings or by tuning in to our Sunday morning livestream, that our hymns feature voices singing the words. These are actually First Church Choir members who record their own voices and email them to me. I then add the voices to the accompaniment that I record during the week, and, voila! We have a hymn that you can listen to or sing along with at home.

BUT... just like Sunday mornings past, anyone and everyone can, and is encouraged to, sing the hymns! And now you can belt these out in the privacy of your own home where you won’t worry about getting the side eye from the person in the pew beside you, or catching Covid from anyone. You can record you voice on your cellphone while you sing along with the instrumental music that I will send you, and you too can be part of the whole singing congregation! And, just like Sunday hymn singing, good voices are not required - just spirit-filled enjoyment.

If this is something you’d like to try, get in touch with me at mmercier@fccsimsbury.org, and I will tell you how. And...remember that Christmas is coming, which means carols and Christmas songs, too. Who can resist a good carol?

I hope to hear from anyone that likes hymns. Let’s have some fun with music that we love!

Thanks - and be safe!-Mark

Wednesday Bible Study

Feeling a bit stir crazy and want to get studious? Join Rev. George Harris in a virtual Lectionary Bible Study on Zoom! We will meet on Wednesdays at 10 a.m. To join the meeting this Wednesday, click here!

Tea @ 3 Community

Tea is comforting - and so is connecting with others. Adults age 50+ are invited to join the Fall 2020 Tea @ 3 Community by For All Ages, enjoy tea at home M-F at 3:00 pm, and discover the wonderful experience of sharing a weekly conversation over the phone during tea-time with a young adult Tea-Mate.

For more information, click here, or visit Tea @ 3. You may also contact Deb Bibbins.

Capital Campaign Payments

When writing a check towards the Capital Campaign, please clearly mark in the memo line “Capital Campaign.”

If you choose to have your payments made via your bank web bill pay, it is important the check makes mention of the Capital Campaign. Failure to do so, may lead to donations being posted toward an incorrect fund.

If you have further questions, please contact Shannon Lindsay in the office at (860) 651-3593 or email slindsay@fccsimsbury.org.
Luminaries in Honor of Loved Ones

Your Name (please print) ____________________________________________
Telephone / Email __________________________________________________
In memory of ______________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
OR
In honor of _________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________

~ Please notify the church office of any address changes. ~

First Church of Christ
689 Hopmeadow Street
Simsbury, CT 06070