

january
2024

Herald of Good TIDINGS

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’”
~ Isaiah 40:9



FROM THE INTERIM PASTOR:

“. . . I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall
down into the grass, how to kneel down in the
grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll
through the fields, which is what I have been
doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
**Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?**”
+ Mary Oliver

Mary Oliver's poem, *The Summer Day*, is enormously popular. I've copied the last half of it here, because it speaks of a life lived with *intention*. . . and intention is what I want to share with us today. Oliver suggests that it is better to have some sense of where you are going, and why, in your life, better than just repetitively doing whatever we've been doing, over and over and over again. If “everything dies at the last, and too soon. . .” let's not waste the time God has given us.

The New Testament is filled with references to something new. There's new wine, and new tombs, new teachings, new cloth, new wineskins, new tongues, new garments, new covenants, new ideas, new things, new creation, new self, new moons, new ways, new births, new commandments, new names, new songs, a new Jerusalem, new heaven, a new earth. From the Gospel of Matthew right through to the Revelation of St. John, the New Testament is shot through with newness.

For us, today, this is a call to examine what God's call for us is in this new year. This isn't newness for the sake of newness, but the newness that grows out of a recognition that what fit yesterday so well, is perhaps not exactly what meets today's needs.

On Christmas, my family gathered, and we were joined by my nephew's mentor, the man who taught him his profession and guided his career. I've known this man for probably thirty years – he's always been a man of strong opinions, wicked humor, a presence in any room. But today he's aged, he's been ill, and now my nephew, instead of being led by him, helps him get out of a chair, pays attention when he tries to maintain a conversation... their long-time relationship is new again, as it has evolved to new circumstances.

What shall we do with this new year given to us by God? How shall we live it out? What does our world need from us this year? What skills and gifts do we have to offer? Or imagine it this way: what things are we good at and which of them might we share with our community? How can we make Auburn stronger, help it continue to grow as a loving place to live?

Let's live 2024 with intention and purpose.

Pastor Virginia

IMPORTANT NOTICE



The Annual Meeting will be held immediately following the 10 a.m. worship service on **Sunday, January 21st**. **This will be an in-person meeting with Zoom access for those who would like to participate remotely.**

(NOTE: All committee/board end-of-year reports are **NOW** due.)

The All Committee Meeting (the first 2024 meeting of all committees and boards) will be held on Monday, **January 22nd**, beginning at 7 p.m. At this meeting, committee chairpersons, secretaries, Church Council representatives, etc. will be selected.

The **Installation of Officers and Board Members** will be held during the worship service on **January 28th**.

2023 Pledges

Please note that donations received **before** Jan. 1st will appear on your 2023 donation statement. Also, any donations received by mail **after** Jan. 1st may be included on your 2023 donation statement **if** the letter is postmarked on or before Dec. 31st. Any donations postmarked **after** Dec. 31st will appear on your 2024 donation statement. Thank you!

2024 Offering Envelopes are located in the back of the sanctuary. If you can't find your envelopes, it means you did not make a pledge or didn't indicate that you wanted envelopes. Please see Lori Stockhaus with any questions.

Coffee Hour Hosts:

- 1/7 & 14 **VOLUNTEERS NEEDED — please sign-up in fellowship hall**
- 1/21 Memorial/Scholarship Committee, Nominating Committee & Library Committee (2023 members)

Please note: 1/28/24 will be the first coffee hour hosted by 2024 committee members. A new coffee hour schedule will be distributed at the All Committee Meeting on Monday, January 22nd.

We would like to feature your special occasion in the *Tidings*. Complete this form and return to the church office.

I give First Congregational Church permission to put my family member's birthday or anniversary in the monthly newsletter the *Tidings*.



Name(s)

Occasion

Date

Signature (adults only please)

Please return to Church office.



Happy New Year! I hope everyone had a nice Christmas and got to spend time with loved ones. I want to thank everyone who helped with the Christmas baskets this year. It's such a great gift for the recipients.

January is Cervical Health Awareness Month, National Birth Defects Prevention Month, National Glaucoma Awareness Month, and Thyroid Awareness Month.

Please keep up with your preventative checkups. A friend of mine passed away a few years ago and she said, "It's my own fault. I didn't get my pap smear done like I should have." We talked about how her daughter, daughters-in-law, and granddaughters have learned from this. Cancer treatment has come a long way in means of treatment and cure.

Happy, Healthy New Year! God Bless —
 Deb Pranaitis, Parish Nurse
 cell: 508-612-4521

ALTAR FLOWER SIGN UP SHEET

The 2024 altar flower sign-up sheet (with scheduling through mid-April) is on the clipboard in fellowship hall. If you “reserve” a date each year during this time period, please review the information listed and either indicate your approval by initialing by your name, or make changes directly on the sheet. Please keep in mind that, due to the changing nature of a calendar, we can't always ensure you will be the sole provider on any given Sunday, in which case your flexibility is greatly appreciated. **Since we aren't always able to determine who signed up first, please be sure to indicate your preference: a centerpiece or 3-sided arrangements in the brass vases on the altar and we'll do our best to accommodate you.** Please note: Berg Florist will bill you.

Providing the info ahead of time on the sign-up sheet is a huge timesaver when preparing the bulletin.

Thank you,
 Denise



JANUARY BIRTHDAYS

Caleb Armstrong	~	Jan. 4 th
Lynn Largesse	~	Jan. 6 th
Lillian McPherson	~	Jan. 19 th
Cassandra Stockhaus	~	Jan. 23 rd

Bell Choir Rehearsals will resume on Saturday, January 20th at 10 a.m.

We continue to look to add members to both of our choirs.

If interested, please speak with Paulette.



January Tidings from Here We Grow Preschool

Happy New Year! We hope you all had a wonderful and relaxing holiday.

Now that the cold weather has settled in, we will be having all our gross motor time in the vestry. We feel so blessed to have this space available to us; most schools in our area do not have such a wonderful space.

Our 3-year-olds had their Christmas programs on Dec. 18th and 21st with a sing-along in the classrooms with family and friends. The 4-year-olds' concert was on the stage in fellowship hall the morning of Dec 20th. It was so nice to see everyone enjoy the show, and parents were very generous with the goodies for our 4-year-old parties. We hope some of you were able to stop by and see the children perform; they worked very hard learning new songs and singing some old favorites. A big thank you to my husband for playing Santa for the children this year, and to Rich, a friend of the Here We Grow Board, for coming in for the Monday/Friday 3-year-olds. They all love to see Santa come to school.

This year, we again collected toys in conjunction with the Auburn Police Department's "Secret Santa" program. Family support was great; we filled our large box multiple times and were able to help make the holiday special for some Auburn families.

Enrollment forms for next year have gone out for in-house registration and spaces are filling up. We will continue with in-house enrollment until the middle of February, then we will open it up to new parents and children. If you know of anyone looking for a preschool, we would be happy to hear from them. Open House will take place March 21, 2024.

In February, families will be selling tickets for our calendar raffle fundraiser. Beginning March 1st, we will be picking a winner every day for 31 days. If you would like a chance at winning some great prizes, please speak with a parent or staff member. Denise will have a sample calendar in the office.

Wishing everyone a Happy and Healthy New Year.

The Here We Grow Staff

FROM THE NOMINATING COMMITTEE

The Nominating Committee is still trying to fill 11 Board/Committee positions prior to the fast approaching January Annual Meeting.

The committee vacancies include:

Board of Deacons (4), Board of Ed (1), Stewardship (2), Nominating (2), Board of Trustees (1), and Music (1).

If you have an interest in any of these openings, please reach out to Michele Schillinger (508-259- 2239) or Sheila Skog (978-387-7705).

Thank you.



VOLUNTEER NEEDED

The Board of Trustees is looking for a volunteer who is certified as a Food Protection Manager and in Allergen Awareness (or who is willing to obtain these certifications) in order to meet the requirements for the church's annual food permit renewal. The church is willing to cover/reimburse costs associated with the courses and any required tests. If you're interested in learning more, please contact the church office, 508-832-2845 or speak with one of the trustees.

Thank you to everyone who contributed a poinsettia to decorate the sanctuary and altar during the Christmas season. **Special thanks to Michele Schillinger** for all her hard work coordinating all the details, and thank you to all who helped unload the delivery and assisted with the marking and arrangement of the poinsettias.

We also want to recognize Michele for all her efforts in organizing and assembling the **beautiful** Deacons' Christmas baskets!



A note to thank you for your thoughtfulness. The Christmas basket was chock-full of well wishes and delicious treats.

May your New Year be filled with all that you hold special. Take a moment to savor a bit of joy each day.

Pat Bukoski

Thank you to my incredible church family for the Christmas gift. I am so blessed to be your Parish Nurse. You are my family and I love you all.

Sincerely,

Debbie

As we continue to experience rising costs, you continue to amaze me by your generosity shown to me at Christmas time. And, once again, responding with, "Thank You!" seems so inadequate. I hope and pray that somehow you understand how much I appreciate you and your thoughtfulness. Wishing you and yours a blessed New Year.

With heartfelt gratitude,

Denise (Church Secretary)

Come to an introduction to the Bible course beginning on Tuesday, January 9, from 12:30-2 p.m. (includes eating lunch together). In this 6 week study we'll learn about the Bible – what it really is, how we read it, where it came from and why we continue to read and study it. Pastor Virginia will be offering this basic introduction to the Bible. Our text will be, *What Is the Bible?* by Anne Robertson, part of The Dickinson Series from the Massachusetts Bible Society. Available in print or Kindle. Kindle \$6, print \$11 <https://www.amazon.com/What-Bible-Exploring-Dickinson-Book>.

Sheila Skog has volunteered to manage the book purchases, so please contact her at 978-387-7705.

Look for a sign-up sheet in fellowship hall. Please call the church office, 508-832-2845, or reach out to Pastor Virginia with any questions.

During times of inclement weather, we have set up an account with WBZ - TV Channel 4 enabling us to report Church service cancellations. However, if weather is severe enough to result in area power outages, we may not have the capability to contact them. So you should always use your best judgment, exercising caution, when deciding whether to venture out to service during stormy weather.



“Mary” by Marion Israelian

The sky of Nazareth glows orange with the setting sun. I step along, following the little path, careful not to stumble; after all, I am expecting a child soon. But I wanted to come once more to this place where the mystery began - to remember.

It seemed like just yesterday; I had come with my watering pots, as I did every day, the same routine. The spring was deserted, but now, for some reason I was full of wonder and expectation, alert to the sound of the rushing spring water.

Then - “Mary” - a voice broke into the silence. - I looked around - no one was there, only a shaft of sunlight. Then, it came again, hushed - “Mary.” I slowly lifted my eyes.

He stood only a few feet away, surrounded by light. “Do not be afraid; I am sent from God. You will conceive and bear a son. You shall name him Jesus.” “How can that be?” I whispered. “I have no husband.”

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be holy.” Silence hung like a mist around us. Slowly, from my heart came the words, “Let it be.” Then the stranger was gone. The spring gurgles, and I wonder - “What is happening to me - a poor peasant girl?”

* * * * *

I hurry home, and although I fight them, tears sting my eyes. For even now, after all these months, the women gossip and whisper as I pass. “There goes Mary, large with child. She sinned before she was married, and now she claims that her child was conceived by the Holy Spirit - does she think we are mad to believe such a lie?”

The long months of rejection and hurt wash over me. “Oh, God, what have you asked of me?” I cry.

The air is quiet except for the sound of Joseph’s hammer in his carpenter’s shop behind the house. Pounding steadily - it seems as though my heart - is keeping rhythm with the hammer, and the old Psalm of David rings in my ears. “Sing praise to the Lord . . . Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.” The words fill me with promise. The promise that God’s assurance brings light out of dark, hope out of hurt. Here I whisper the words again, “Oh yes, my Lord, let it be!”

Far in the east, a lone star gleams with a peculiar sparkle. I watch it as Joseph places the packs on the donkey. We must cross the Jordan and climb the treacherous Judean hills to reach the place of taxation, Bethlehem. As Joseph lifts me upon the donkey’s back, I cannot ignore the sudden rush of fear. “Oh, stop!” I want to cry out. - “Let me remain here at home in my safe bed, where I can deliver my child surrounded by my mother and aunts.” but the donkey’s hoofs ring hollow on the cobblestones. I turn and look back - somehow I know that nothing will ever be the same again . . . The journey has begun. I watch Joseph’s sure hand as he leads the little donkey forward into the darkness. I think to myself, surely God is leading us, just as Joseph is leading the donkey.

High in the purple sky the strangely bright star gleams before us like a lamp in God’s window. How can I fear the unknown when I travel with the One who is always there to place a lamp in the window and gently draws me in the right direction?

In one dark and obscure moment, it is done - in the little stable that Joseph has found. I lie back on the clean straw - breathless from pain - but also amazed at the strange aura of wonder that has settled on our little stable. The lantern flickers yellow - the silence grows deeper. “It is finished - you are born little Jesus.” I kiss the small face nestled against my cheek, while Joseph arranges tufts of hay in a cow trough.

I draw the baby closer . . . I count his tiny little fingers and toes. Suddenly my heart is beating hard within me. “Oh, holy Child - Who are you?”

“Mary” by Marion Israelian (continued . . .)

It will not be long, little one - soon you will be romping on the hillside chasing the fat lambs, and throwing pebbles into the spring. And too soon you will skin your knees, and later you will taste the pain and the heart-break that awaits in this world. When that time arrives, I cannot protect you as I do now. I pray that I am ready for the fearful responsibility of being your mother. - It seems beyond me now, and I am humbled at the thought . . . Sleep on, little one.

I gaze up at Joseph, my heart and soul too full to speak. He understands. A lamb bleats softly and a chill breeze moves through the shadows. Joseph draws a blanket over us. I reach for Joseph's hand. The truth shines around us even brighter than the brilliant star overhead. This child is mine - but He belongs to all!

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Happy New Year! The New Year celebration represents a new start. A chance to let old behaviors and experiences fade away into the past. This celebration is a time to reevaluate all the different things in your life and decide what to keep and what to let go of. Perhaps for some, that means going through your Tupperware cabinet and tossing anything that is missing a lid or cleaning out your closet and filling as many bags as possible to donate to a local charity. For others, though, it means quitting destructive behaviors like smoking or drinking, or adding beneficial behaviors to our life, such as a healthier diet or more exercise or spending time with our children or elderly grandparents. Whichever category you fall into (maybe both) the bottom line is that we want to do better. We want to be better than we were last year.



My New Year's resolution (as it is often referred to) is to read the Bible in its entirety. Cover to cover. To do that in one year's time, it will be very beneficial to commit to reading every day! As a result, I hope to become a better leader in the church, a better parent, a better wife, a better friend, and to have a better understanding of what God expects from me.

Think about your resolutions and consider the bigger picture. How does your "better" effect those around you? Self-care choices absolutely effect your loved ones. A "better" you will change your relationships; it will change what you are willing to tolerate. It changes your mood; it absolutely will change the energy you put out to the world. Change is difficult and scary, but I know you can do it. May God be with you on your journey, reminding you along the way what you are capable of, as a child of God!

Congratulations to all the children (and our 3 wise-ladies) on a beautiful Christmas Pageant. It is not an easy feat for young people to stand in front of a church full of people, talking and singing. (And there were A LOT of people at the pageant this year.) Every single child did a great job!!! Thank you to all the parents and grandparents that support us!

We are kicking off the New Year with a new classroom. Lilly has been working hard getting it decorated and ready for the children. **I am still in need of a few volunteers to help run the class.** You will have my full support, with lessons ready to go. This is a great opportunity for anyone who wants to build relationships with our youth.

February 2nd is right around the corner. On that Friday afternoon, our YOM (Youth **O**n a **M**ission) will be heading out for our yearly adventure to Monadnock Mountain for the Encounter Weekend. Many of the students this year will be attending for the first time. I always look forward to seeing the students' reactions to a weekend of worship and praise and tons of fun. Say a prayer that we have snow. Snowtubing is always a big hit at this event!!!

Lastly, I want to remind you of this: God loves you! He adores you!!! The best way to say "I love you" back to God, is to always act on love. I challenge you, for 2024, before doing or saying anything, ask yourself, "Does this come from love? Am I showing gratitude to God through these words and deeds?" If the answer is, "No," try a different approach! John says in 1 John 3:18 - "Let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth." Amen.

~ Shannon Hartmann, Director of Religious Education

Tidings 2024 — Subscription Renewal Form

In an effort to offset the cost of publishing the monthly *Tidings*, we are asking for members and friends to support a **VOLUNTARY** subscription.

Your participation is entirely optional and will not affect whether or not you receive the *Tidings*.

Annual Renewal - (10 issues, no July or Aug. issue)

Please enclose a check or money order for \$10 payable to: **First Congregational Church.**

Please write "**Tidings**" in the memo section.

Thank You!

Mail to: First Congregational Church
128 Central St., Auburn, MA 01501

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Please call the Church office with any questions, 508-832-2845.

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