

SPIRITUAL LIFE HIGHLIGHTS

Church is a place to belong

LA GRANDE — The sermon at Faith Lutheran Church will consider Mary, Jesus' mother, going to visit her relatives as she was expecting a child (Luke 1:39-45). It is appropriate to be with family during exciting and challenging times. Each person is benefitted as we have a place to belong. We learn how to work with others and others learn how to be with us. The church is a gathering of people who receive God's grace. Church is a place to belong.

Candlelight Christmas Eve service features Communion

LA GRANDE — First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

SUBMISSIONS

Churches and faith-based groups are encouraged to submit Highlights for the Spiritual Life page by 4 p.m. Tuesday for publication Thursday. Submit by email to news@lagrandeobserver.com (with Highlights in the subject line).

will celebrate the fourth Sunday of Advent on Dec. 19 with the lighting of the love candle by Juan and Amanda Hernandez and their family. Pastor Archie Hook's message, "For God So Loved the World," comes from John 3:16-17.

All are welcome to attend a candlelight service on Christmas Eve beginning at 6:30 p.m. The service will be filled with carols,

the retelling of the Christmas story in scripture, and closing with Communion.

Learn to 'light the world' this Christmas season

NORTHEASTERN OREGON — On Sunday, Dec. 19, members of the congregations will be speaking and/or providing music during The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' Sacrament Services, and Sunday School will be held during the second hour of scheduled meetings.

The "Come, Follow Me" lesson for the week of Dec. 20 will focus on the "The Living Christ," a January 2000 testimony of Jesus Christ and his life, mission and forthcoming return that was signed

by all 15 apostles serving at that time.

We can make this Christmas season happier by showing love the same way Jesus did during his mortal ministry. For ideas on how, visit www.lighttheworld.org and review the service suggestions and other ideas.

Attend service in person or online

LA GRANDE — St. Peter's Episcopal Church will meet for worship at 11 a.m. on Sunday, Dec. 19. The service will include Holy Communion. Masks and social distancing are required. The service will be livestreamed, and the link to that stream will be posted on the church's Facebook page on

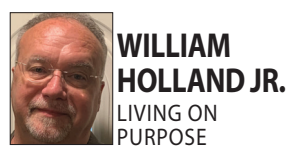
Saturday, Dec. 18. That same link can be used to watch the service at a later time.

Christmas Eve service held in the afternoon

LA GRANDE — Zion Lutheran Church's worship service on Sunday, Dec. 19, begins at 9 a.m. The service, which will include Holy Communion, will be followed by a time of fellowship. Masks and social distancing are required. The service will be streamed live to YouTube, and the link for that stream will be posted on Zion's Facebook page and website on Saturday, Dec. 18.

On Christmas Eve Zion will have an in-person service at 4 p.m. — *The Observer*

Joseph's huge step of faith



WILLIAM HOLLAND JR.
LIVING ON PURPOSE

This is the time of year when we display our nativity sets and it's common to see depictions on the front of Christmas cards that have Mary and Joseph in a stable with the baby Jesus. The word "nativity" comes from a Latin term that simply means "born." We also hear the word "incarnation" at this time of year. Within the Christian faith, this is referring to the Son of God and how he willingly came down from heaven and took on the human form of a human to save us from our sin. He is Emmanuel, which means "God with us." His mission was to rescue and restore us, and because of his sacrifice we can now have an eternal relationship with him.

There are several interesting details about the earthly parents of Jesus. His mother, Mary, becoming pregnant with him while still a virgin is a great place to begin. Our heavenly Father sent his son Jesus to earth, but as we know, Christ also had an earthly dad by the name of Joseph. History reveals it was common

in those days for an older man to be engaged to a younger woman, and many scholars are convinced that Mary was much younger than Joseph, probably being in her early teens. Being betrothed means the couple were to be celibate until they were married.

When Joseph discovered Mary was pregnant, he did not want to publicly disgrace her but rather decided to just privately cancel the marriage. We can only imagine the agony and disappointment he was feeling as he concluded she had been unfaithful. As he was making plans to deal with the situation, an angel appeared to him in a dream saying, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

We know that Mary is adored, and rightfully so, but we must consider this was also a huge step of faith for Joseph. There is not much information given about Joseph except that he was a carpenter and an honest man who upheld the law. He was present when Jesus was found teaching in the

temple at the age of 12, but it's presumed he had passed away before Christ was crucified as Jesus asked John from the cross to take care of his mother.

Imagine being asked to believe your young, pregnant betrothed was carrying the promised Messiah. Joseph put aside his doubt and likely had to turn a deaf ear to the gossip caused by her pregnancy. And imagine a young girl being approached by the Creator of Heaven and Earth and given a mission that would shape the course of human history. Both Joseph and Mary humbly submitted to the will of the Lord.

So, why did the Almighty choose them for the task of raising the Son of God? Because he knew they would hold strong in their faith. And what about those today who still declare they have no room for Jesus? Or the individuals who only celebrate the most significant event of all time during the Christmas season? He is still patiently waiting. Never before or since have the heavens declared the glory of God with more hope and excitement than when the Lamb of God was born.

William "Billy" F. Holland Jr. is a minister, author and chaplain. To learn more visit billyhollandministries.com.

Befriend the longest night



LAURA ELLY HUDSON
BELIEVING AND BECOMING

Are you afraid of the dark, or are you a night owl who prefers it? Or maybe like me, you are somewhere in between. I no longer harbor the childhood fears provoked when the night's mantle obscured my room's familiar objects. But I never enjoy waking up with swirling thoughts, unable to sleep in the darkest hours before dawn. I like to be awake in the light and asleep in the dark.

Now that we're in mid-December, by 5 p.m., when I sometimes walk home from work, it's dark enough to watch the stars appear, and we're closing in on the longest night of the year. Dec. 21 is the winter solstice. The word "solstice" comes from Latin, combining words that mean "sun" and "stand still." To astronomers of long ago, it seemed that the sun stood still on the solstice. For millennia, cultures have developed rituals to recognize the winter and

summer still points and to honor the spiritual resonance of these natural phenomena. The end of the longest night symbolized the victory of the sun over the darkness and the first hint of the rebirth of spring.

The actual date remains unknown, but as Christianity became institutionalized, Dec. 25 was chosen as the day to celebrate Jesus' birth, largely because solstice celebrations were so popular. Pre-Christian solstice traditions were incorporated into Christian celebrations and given new names and meanings.

But there is also an overlap in these symbols and their meanings, the rebirth of the sun and the birth of the Savior. Isaiah 9:2, often read on Christmas Eve, begins, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." Christians interpret this Hebrew scripture with John 1:5 in mind: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

I love these scriptures and the imagery of Christ's light. But perhaps, in a world now so flooded with light that

star-sightings are rare for many people, it's time to make peace with the darkness. Solar system science assures us that the sun will not get stuck on the solstice. Maybe we can trust that the darkness is temporary in other ways too. In an era when the future feels uncertain, when the pandemic, climate change and a host of other challenges make collective humanity feel lost in the dark, one thing we do know is that the longest night will end and the light will come again.

This year on the winter solstice, why not let yourself befriend the night? Shut off all the lights and turn off all the screens for an hour or more; rest your eyes and your mind in the still point before the light returns. Treasure the dreams that visit you as you slip into sleep. After all, the absence of light is not the absence of God, and the hiddenness and uncertainty of night are also the conditions of the deep earth, where seeds wait to break open in their season.

Laura Elly Hudson is co-pastor of the La Grande First Presbyterian Church. You can find her at www.lauraellyhudson.com.

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Services This Week