

**CHRIST CHURCH
COMMUNITY
2020
ADVENT
DEVOTIONAL**

Greetings to You in Christ's Name!

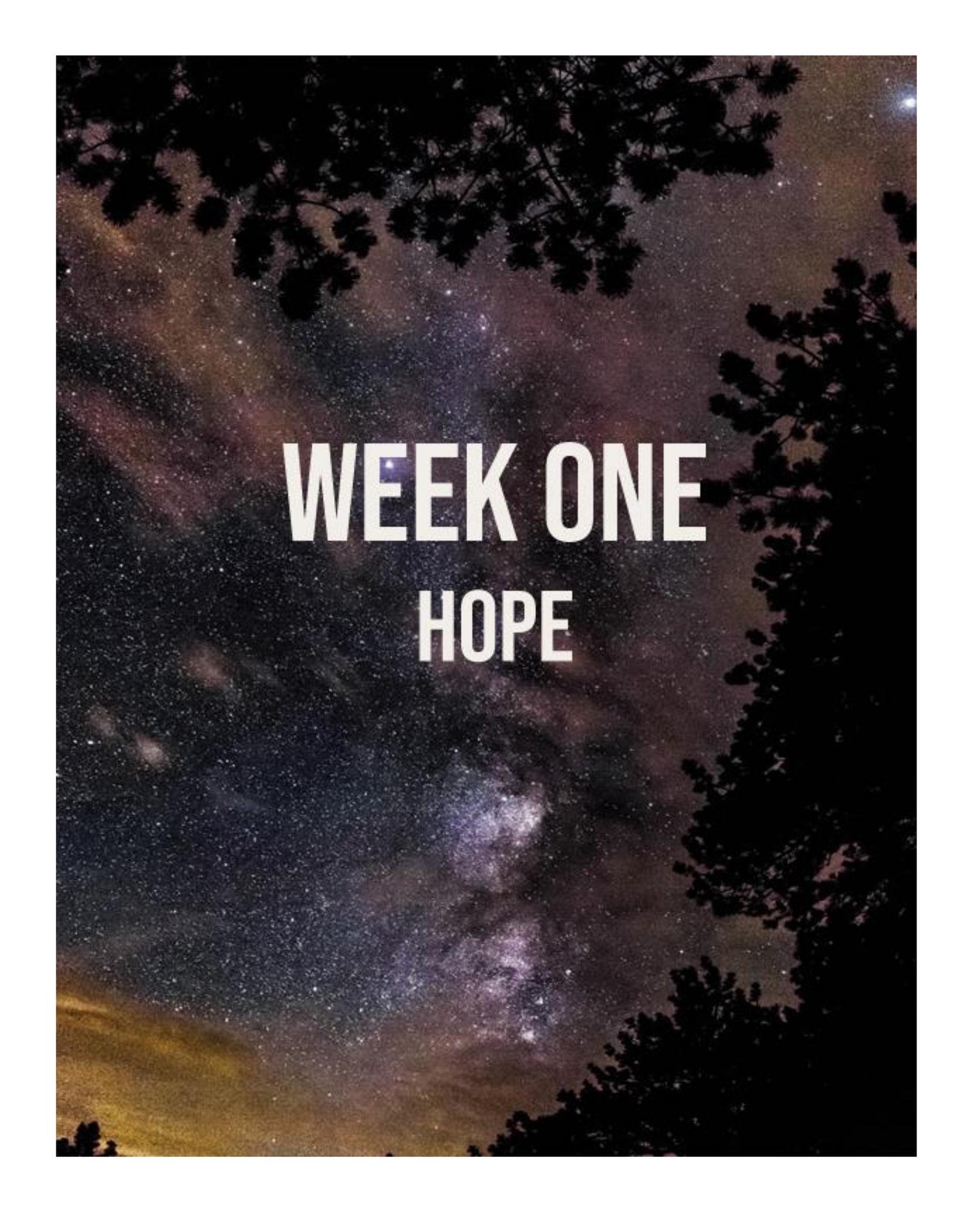
This year has been full of grief in the life of the Church and the world in general. The COVID-19 pandemic, like death, has one power. It has an insatiable appetite for taking things away. It has taken memories, opportunities, resources, traditions, and in the case of 250,000+ Americans, life itself. The pandemic has caused us to part with many beloved rituals and meaningful practices.

This year members of Christ Church and our friends have collaborated to create a new tradition that cannot be taken away from us. Our collective work has resulted in a community crowdsourced advent devotional. These writings are the sacred fruits of our labor. They include reflections on scriptures from people of diverse faith backgrounds and walks of life.

It is my prayer that you find hope, peace, joy, and love in these reflections. May the Spirit that surpasses all understanding be with you this advent season and prepare you for the birth of the Christ-Child.

With gratitude for you,

Rev. Dan Stark,
Pastor, Christ Church UCC, Milwaukee, WI.

A night sky photograph showing the Milky Way galaxy, framed by dark tree silhouettes. The text "WEEK ONE" and "HOPE" is overlaid in white.

WEEK ONE
HOPE

HOPE | Luke 21:25-28

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near...

Hope. It is the first word of the four that mark the weeks of Advent. It may be the one word that best sums up what Advent means to me. Hope.

In my forty-some years of pastoral ministry, I enjoyed the four Sundays of Advent, even though a kind of culture war often battled with the traditions of Advent Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. It was a worship planner's challenge to resist jumping immediately into Christmas carols, and to sing the songs of Advent for a couple of weeks. I tried to focus during these four Sundays on the prophetic scriptures in ways that prepared our hearts in hope for the birth of Jesus and a new liturgical year, and not just as a warm-up for a "White Christmas" holiday.

When we light that first candle on the Advent wreath, we recite words of hope. We emphasize the expectation built into biblical tradition. Hope is not optimism, which can be nothing more than wishful thinking. Hope is grounded in something deeper and more substantial.

The passage today from Luke's gospel does not sound hopeful at first, where it seems that the sky is falling. Yet in the final verse Jesus says, "But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." When everything seems to be going in the wrong direction, look up, and watch God bring Good News!

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) Evangelical activist and author Jim Wallis paraphrases this verse like this: "Hope means believing in spite of the evidence, then watching the evidence change."

God of Hope, help us to look up and see you coming. Amen.

-Rev. Dr. John Helt, Christ Church

AWAKEN | Mark 13:33-37

³³ Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴ It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. ³⁵ "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back – whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. ³⁶ If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. ³⁷ What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'

Back in the days when I was teaching fifth grade, I'd give my class a "test" early in the school year. It served as a barometer of sorts, letting me know what I might expect in behavior for the coming school year. In September, on a day when I was wearing soft-soled shoes (critical!), as my students were working on an assignment, I would grab a couple of papers from my desk, quietly appoint a class monitor, and walk out the door. My students assumed that I was going on an office errand. In reality, I simply went down the hallway, rounded a corner and waited. Most years the scenario played out like this: as soon as I left, the students quickly appointed a sentinel to stand at the classroom door. All remained quiet until I turned the corner. The decibel level that emanated from my open classroom door told me a lot. A loud level meant that likely, a classroom "entertainer" was eliciting silly laughter by clowning around, wads of paper were making perfect arcs into the wastebasket for a cheered-on 3 point score and pencil missiles were being launched from paper clip catapults at designated "targets". After a few seconds I would begin my return journey down the hallway, and I would inevitably hear the sentinel hiss, "She's COMING!" Seconds later I would return to a classroom full of angelic pupils, with only the sound of pencils moving across paper.

Reading the scripture for today, I couldn't help but recall the sentinel that alerted everyone to my return. I hope that there is a sentinel to warn me of Christ's coming, because then, I too, could be on my best behavior! However, the scripture warns us we will not know the hour of Christ's coming. While it's tempting to think that I will have fair warning to be on my best behavior, in truth, I know that the expectation is for me to be my best self on a daily basis. I want Christ to find me doing what He expects of His disciples – hopefully more! I don't want Him to find me being silly when there is serious work to be done. I don't want Him to see me trying to score more for myself or hurling missiles of thought or deed at those I perceive as targets. I'll be praying for the strength to remain watchful to doing what is right, even if I don't know when He is coming.

-Nancy Wareham, Christ Church

PROCLAIM | Isaiah 61:1-4

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. ⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations...

When Pastor Dan sent out his request for Advent devotionals, I did not hesitate in choosing this passage. I have always found great wisdom and encouragement in the words of the prophet, Isaiah, and especially in this passage. But as I read these words again this morning...the morning after a national election the outcome of which is still in doubt...they spoke to me anew in a strong and powerful way.

Having lived on this earth now for 65 years I can tell you that I grew up believing our country was "the good guys." That there was indeed something to this idea of "the common good" and that as flawed as our nation has been at various times, that we were moving to a better world for all. Sadly, I no longer believe that as strongly as I once did, if at all. The fact that so many people have chosen to follow someone whose very being is contrary to everything I have ever held dear has shaken my faith in my country like never before. So where does that leave me? How then shall I live in a world that more and more has become a place I do not recognize?

Maybe some of you are asking yourself the same thing. I'm not sure what the answers to those questions are for me but maybe I can better prepare myself for whatever comes next by reminding myself that I am still called to offer words of hope to those who are hurting, to hold close those whose pain seems unbearable, and to help in whatever way I can to rebuild what has been destroyed. I am called to do these things because I know that the Spirit of the Lord is upon me and that God has anointed me to do these things. In this I have no doubt.

I'd like to close with a prayer from Henri Nouwen;

Dear God, Speak gently in my silence. When the loud outer noises of my surroundings and the loud inner noises of my fears keep pulling me away from you, help me to trust that you are still there even when I am unable to hear you. Give me ears to listen to your small, soft voice saying, "Come to me, you who are overburdened, and I will give you rest...for I am gentle and humble of heart." Let that loving voice be my guide. Amen.

-Rev. Andy Oren, Christ Church

WAIT | 2 Peter 3:13-15

But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. ¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵ and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation, so also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him...

Advent is a season of waiting with joy for the Savior's birth. We wait for His light in the darkness. We wait for comfort in sorrow. We wait in hope for peace on earth and goodwill to all people. During the pandemic this Advent season we are waiting for a vaccine, curbside deliveries, news about family and friends, COVID-19 testing, medical test results, and a return to "normal".

The scripture 2 Peter 3:13-15a, is a letter written by Peter to a church to encourage them. Peter reminds this congregation to follow Jesus' teachings to become stronger Christians as they wait for the return of the Lord. He reminds them that God is very patient and wants all of us to receive his grace.

In this Advent 2020 season, it's important to emulate God's teachings by showing patience in our relationships and continue to deepen our faith. God is walking beside us as we face many challenges while waiting for the birth of Christ.

Dear Lord, Show me the way to become a more caring person during this Advent season. Give me the strength to be patient with others. Let your words help me to show love to others in my daily life. Through your grace, Lord, I will understand your teachings and express my love for you in my interactions with others. Amen.

-Randene Wick, Christ Church

PREPARE | Mark 1:2-3

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight...'"*

When my wife was pregnant with our daughter, we both wrote letters to our unborn child. In a way, they were meant to be something that she could read years down the road from her baby book. We figured she could get them as a gift after some milestone like finishing high school, graduating college, or getting married. However, I think these letters also meant something special, to us, too.

To me this letter meant that this little human, this person whom I had only known through kicks in her mom's belly – was real. The letter made her real to me and I think it also helped me mentally, spiritually, and emotionally prepare for her to arrive. Here's just a part of what I wrote to her:

Dear Charlotte,

...Now you don't know this yet, but the Hebrew word for "to hope" also means "to wait." So, when you hope for something, it means to really, really, really wait for something. You prepare and pray and hold out for it because you want it so much. I want you to know that we have both been hoping for you for a long time. I can't wait to meet you.

Love, Dad

In a way, this letter reminds me of our lesson from Mark's Gospel, where the evangelist quotes the Prophet Isaiah about the one who would prepare for the Messiah. I say this because when you want something beyond measure you put your hope into action as best as you can. Like waiting for a new baby to arrive, you prepare as if it is in the process of happening. Although the Hebrew word for hope means "to wait" – it isn't a wait-and-see kind of waiting. It's active. This means that you put your hope into action by being involved in bringing it into fruition.

Mark's Gospel today is a hopeful message to all who bear witness to the evangelist's words. It is a call of preparation for the arrival of the long-awaited Christ-Child. The Prophet Isaiah would prepare a way for John the Baptist. The Baptizer would prepare a way for Jesus. Jesus would prepare a Way for each of us. This year as we prepare to hear the story of the birth of Christ, may we have an active hope that readies our hearts, homes, and houses of worship for the Lord.

*Prepare our hearts and minds, O God.
Help us wait with an active hope,
For the Christ-Child to break into our lives. Amen.*

-Rev. Dan Stark, Christ Church

BAPTISM | John 1:23-28

He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

My uncle Herb was a minister. My faith journey began when he baptized me in my Grandmother's house on New Year's Day. While I obviously don't remember the moment, I feel blessed to have been baptized by my parents' brother-in-law; he also officiated my parents' marriage and would eventually officiate our marriage. How did your faith journey begin?

I continued my faith journey with Sunday school and confirmation at Christ Church. Confirmation is where I learned that baptism is the outward and visible sign of the grace of God. Years later, I continued my faith journey by attending Lay Academy. How did your faith journey continue?

Baptism is the sign and seal of the care of the church. All throughout my faith journey many members of many churches nurtured and caring for me. Who cared for you on your faith journey?

John baptized Jesus. This began the few years of Jesus' preaching and teaching. Jesus' faith journey led him to the cross. My faith journey continues. I don't know where it will lead me. Where will your faith journey lead you?

It all began with baptism.

*Dear God,
Please help me to find my way, my passion.
Be with me on my faith journey. Amen.*

-Jill Unglaub, Christ Church

GOSPEL | Luke 2:10-12

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger..."

"Do not be afraid!" the angel says. You know what I have to say about that? *"Hey angel, come visit me in 2020 and then talk to me about fear!"* It's cold and dark outside this winter, but things just seem a little colder and darker this year than I can remember from advents past. Could it be from tensions and factions within our families and friendships due to our recent Presidential Election? Maybe it's due to our growing concerns about white supremacy and domestic terrorism. Or perhaps it is the recent race riots in Minneapolis, Louisville, and Kenosha? Maybe it feels this way because of our worries about wildfires, tropical storms, and climate change all over. Or – could it feel like this because of the coronavirus pandemic which has claimed 250,000+ lives in our country alone? The world just seems dark, hopeless, and kind of hostile right now. Yet, despite all this, the Christmas angel tells us: *"Do not be afraid!"*

In some ways it is hard to see the light when everything seems so scary. However, when we gather with our friends and families this year to listen to Christmas music, light candles, and hear the story of Jesus' birth against the backdrop of our troubled world via Zooms and Facetimes, Skypes and Google Meets – we live in the same world that God's Son was sent to save. That is in a nutshell the promise of the Gospel. God is surprising and regularly shows up when and where we least expect God to be, and the light shines in the darkness where it is least expected to shine. So, although this world is dark, it hasn't been forgotten or abandoned by God. For if God's Love Incarnate can show up in a barn, perhaps the light can pierce the darkness which is draped over our world right now. The things which worry us will have their day and then fade away. God loves the world. Let light be! *"Do not be afraid!"*

*Loving God,
Though the world seems dark and cold right now,
Help us remember that you show up anyways,
And you invite us to do the same for this world you love so deeply.
Amen.*

-Rev. Dan Stark, Christ Church.