

January 2022



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF CHAMPAIGN

Imagine This...

What if our church hosted top-notch music Sundays, afternoon and evening concerts, art festivals, storytelling gatherings, and courageous conversations? What if our church offered meals, potlucks, Halloween soup dinners, picnics, and primo cups of justice-friendly coffee and doughnut holes? What if our church devised all sorts of 'low-threshold' events to which to invite neighbors, colleagues, and friends?

We already do (or have done) several of these things. Our music and jazz Sundays have enthralled our guests. Our Christmas Eve pageants, made blurry by our tears, have told the great, great story. Our Trunk-or-Treat dinner is well-known and appreciated in our community.

Hosting **John McCutcheon** in concert is another, single offering in that energizing vein. We hope our flock will attend in high numbers; we hope our people will invite neighbors, extended family, and friends; we hope local folk music aficionados will help us spread the word to the wider musical community; we hope area students, poets, and writers might come to be schooled.

Dancing could break out. Stories will be shared. Music will awaken hearts. God, we pray, will be delighted as God's children share in fellowship, camaraderie, and, amazingly, song.

JOHN MCCUTCHEON

Sunday 2 p.m.
February 20

First Presbyterian
Church of Champaign
302 W. Church Street, Champaign

Folk music's renaissance man —

Master instrumentalist,
powerful singer-songwriter,
storyteller, and author

Admission is free,
donations appreciated

Proof of vaccination or negative
COVID test required to attend

Face masks must be worn
during the concert

Mission Updates

The Heart of Missions Newsletter has been revived. Our local and global mission agencies have made changes due to COVID restrictions, as well as food and medical supply shortages. The newsletter helps summarize some of what has been in the mission news for our mission workers and agencies during the past week in case you missed it. You can access The Heart of Missions on the church website under the SERVE tab at firstpres.church/heartofmissions

English as Second Language News

BY VAL SMITH, DIRECTOR
VAL@FIRSTPRES.CHURCH

The Volunteer Tutoring Staff met together on zoom on January 10, 2022, to prepare for the new semester of classes. We are all looking forward to meeting new students and welcoming back the students from the Fall semester. Approximately sixty students have enrolled for 'in-person' and zoom classes Monday through Thursday. However, due to the high positivity rate, all classes will begin on zoom.

A special thanks to community member **Dianne Loyet** and church members **Andrew and Beth Holm** for donating English Language materials to the English Language program. We appreciate their generosity. Our 'in-person' tutors will be particularly interested in these new resources to enhance their teaching.

Part of our challenge in teaching multilingual students on the new zoom platform is providing online resources to the volunteer tutors. Due to the generosity of the congregation, we have funds to purchase some online resources. In addition, many free resources have been identified. The tutors have risen to the challenge again and are busy learning new programs.

Finally, many students and volunteer staff had a taste of what it will be like to be back to 'in-person' classes at our Christmas and goodbye party for the former director, **Jeannette Pyne**. The

students were so excited to be back together and encouraged our hearts with their presence. Thank you for your continued support of the English Language Program at FPCC.



On December 13, **Lola Ruthsmansdorfer** and **Rachel Matthews** took all the Angel Tree presents to Kemmerer Village for the 10 children who were not able to go home for the holidays.

Autumn from Development told us that some of these children had never written a wish list before this year and some will have never opened a present before this Christmas.

Thank you for your generosity and love.

Environmental Stewardship

Thank you to all who participated by donating or volunteering for the styrofoam drive Saturday, January 9. We collected one giant bag of styrofoam plus an extra car full. We will continue to collect on Sundays at the Mission table area in Westminster Hall. The Environmental Stewardship Committee continues to find creative ways to help us stay aware and care for God's wonderful creation. Thank you Green Team!

Mission

December Mission Offerings.

The Advent Offering was taken up each of the four Sundays in Advent. It went to The Refugee Center to assist the Afghan families that have been evacuated to our area. We welcome them to their new home. \$2,619.62 was raised.

The Christmas Joy Offering which is taken up Christmas Eve for Retired Ministers and Racial Ethnic Schools was \$2809.

One Winter Night

One Winter Night fundraiser for C-U at Home is coming up on February 4! The group is looking forward to getting back out on the streets and sidewalks of downtown Champaign again this year!

Participants in One Winter Night brave the winter cold as they sleep on the streets in cardboard boxes to get a firsthand experience of what it might be like to be homeless and have no resources available such as those provided by C-U at Home. Funds

raised through sponsorships support C-U at Home's ongoing efforts to provide shelter and other essential services for the most vulnerable homeless.

Here are some ways members of the congregation can help support this event . . .

- sign up to participate at <https://www.cuathome.us/box-dwellers/>
- learn more at <https://www.cuathome.us/business-sponsors/>
- you can give online at www.cuathome.us/, by texting OWN to 50155 or by mail to PO Box 8816, Champaign, IL 61826

The Republic of Cuba

The Republic of Cuba
Jose Martí 1853-1895

BY BOB KIRBY, CUBA PARTNERS
RWK3213@GMAIL.COM

José Martí is modern Cuba's father figure, a martyr in the cause of Cuba Libre and outspoken advocate for racial equality. Born to Cuban Spanish immigrants, Martí was a fearless advocate for Cuban independence from both Spain and the United States. He initially envisioned a model for Cuban government built on that of the United States. However, after residing fifteen years in New York working with a revolutionary committee of Cuban exiles he became aware of the pervasive racism that led him to urge independence from all US influence.

Martí was a scholar, poet, journalist and speaker who was instrumental in freeing Cuba from Spain. He died in battle in 1895 at age 42. He wrote, "It is my duty...to prevent through the independence of Cuba, the U.S.A. from spreading over the West Indies."

The Platt Amendment adopted by Cuba's first constitution in 1901 was a confirmation of Martí's worst fears. It gave the United States authority for continuing control of much of Cuban life for almost the next sixty years.

The words of Martí's poem, "I Cultivate a White Rose", provided words for the most noted patriotic song of Cuba, "Guantanamera." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wg5-m0tNeoY>

*I cultivate a white rose
In June as in January
For the sincere friend
Who gives me his hand frankly.*

*And for the cruel person who tears out
The heart with which I live,
I cultivate neither nettles nor thorns:
I cultivate a white rose.*

Next month: Occupation and Conditional Independence

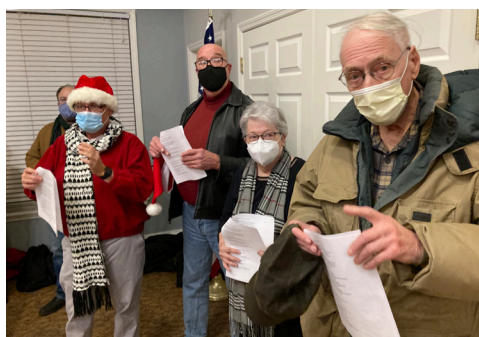
**In an effort to get the
monthly newsletter out
at the beginning of each
month, the deadline
needs to be pushed to the
3rd Monday of the
preceeding month.**

**The deadline for the
February 2022 issue is
Monday, January 17.**



If you missed Christmas Caroling on December 19th, then you missed a great time! We didn't have to worry about temperatures because as we sang, smiling faces beamed joy and warmth back at us. Twenty-four voices, one toddler, one baby and one dog joined in the Noel celebration.

After visiting three locations the fourth was at the Turquoise Picnic Table for hot cocoa, spiced cider and cookies. Plan on joining us next year. In the meantime, make suggestions for safe outings. We may not be able to have potlucks, but we can have fun! What would you like to do? Send your ideas to Gary and Linda at lindakpete@gmail.com or tell Rachel the next time you see her.



If you or a loved one is in the hospital or in need of a pastoral visit, please let the church office know.

Our pastor, staff, and hospital visitors keep this information confidential. Your church wants to be in touch.

Bless be the tie that binds.

Congregational Meeting immediately following the 9 AM service Sunday, January 16

The purpose of the meeting is to elect an Associate Pastor Nominating Committee and elect new officers for 2022.

For a zoom link for the meeting, send your email address to info@firstpres.church or read your Friday Mailer from Pastor Matt.

Children, Youth & Family

Children, Youth, Family

BY MINDY WATTS-ELLIS, DIRECTOR
MINDY@FIRSTPRES.CHURCH

Youth Cookie Sale a Success!

Thank you to all of you who supported our youth Christmas cookie sale.

Thanks to your generosity, we have \$1,016.00 to put towards the youth triennium registration. This will pay the way for two youths to attend. Special thanks to **Sabrina and Wen-mei Hwu** and **Sarah Laufenburg** for being part of our kitchen crew!

Sunday School Update

BY SAMANTHA NICHOLS, SUNDAY SCHOOL COORDINATOR
SAMANTHA@FIRSTPRES.CHURCH

Sunday School Update

In-Person Classes Postponed Through January

Due to rising numbers of Covid-19 cases and hospitalizations, we have decided to postpone the start of Sunday School until February. Our hope is to resume classes on February 6, 2022, though we will continue to monitor the situation and confirm this plan before the end of January.

In the meantime, we encourage families to utilize the resources we have posted on Firstpres.church/kids (password: F1rstpreskids). These resources will cover the same lessons and topics we would have covered in person.

Our younger students can listen to audio recordings of stories about people who supported Jesus including John the Baptist, the 12 Disciples, Joanna, and Susanna. These recordings will be accompanied by

activity suggestions to do together as a family.

One of our goals in the middle and high school class is to explore different spiritual disciplines. These students and their families are encouraged to practice "Lectio Divina" by following the outlines posted on the First Pres Kids website. Lectio Divina is a centuries old spiritual practice inviting us to deeply reflect on God's Word.

Of course, all of these lessons and practices can be utilized by anyone who is interested. Kids and youth of all ages can learn from the *Growing in God's Love Story Bible* and benefit from practicing new spiritual disciplines. We give thanks for your ongoing commitment to the faith formation of children and youth, trusting that all kinds of learning can take place even when we take a break from in-person classes.

Please do not hesitate to reach out with questions and concerns.

Traditional Music Program

As we launch into the new year, I want to take time to thank you all for the support that you've shown the choir, bells and all of our music program during Advent and the Christmas season.

Music is an important part of our worship lives, whether as listeners but especially as participants. You participate weekly as we sing congregational hymns but you can become more active by volunteering to sing in the choir or play in the bell group.

The Chancel Choir and Upper Room Ringers are on a hopefully short hiatus as we fight through the most recent spike in COVID infections. When we return it will be a great time to start a new pattern of activity to revive your spirit and challenge your brain, to say nothing of the great folks you get to hang out with! If you can carry a tune in a bucket, bring your bucket and try choir!

For more info about bells or Chancel Choir, drop me a line at joe@firstpres.church.

From a Trip to Cuba to Playing Pickleball, We Have You Covered

BY SALLIE HUTTON
SALLIE.HUTTON@GMAIL.COM

Small Group Support Team is here to help and guide the small groups of our church any way we can. One of our objectives is to organize and publicize the small groups of our church.

Starting January 16 through the end of the month (health issues permitting), we will be promoting the Winter/Spring 2022 edition of the Small Group Brochure in Westminster Hall.

Brochures, sign up sheets and members of the Support Group will be available on Sunday mornings for you to browse the many options.

"All dreams are within reach. All you have to do is to keep moving toward them"...Viola Davis ... and we add "it's easier if we do it together."



God's promises give us the warrant to pray and the confidence that He will hear and answer. Perseverance in prayer is the command and promise of Jesus.

Acts 2:42—They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Psalms 86:15—But, you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

Hebrews 4:16—Let us then approach the throne of Grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in our time of need.

1 Peter 3:12—For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

St. Peter's United Church of Christ, Champaign IL encourages all Christian churches to observe the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* January 16-21. The theme for this year is "We saw the star in the East, and we came to worship Him." (cf. Matthew 2:2). This week has been celebrated annually since 1908 to encourage unity among all Christian denominations with a focus on ecumenism. Christians are called to seek the new-born king, the king of gentleness, peace and love.

The community we share in our worship together must inspire us to return to ourselves, our churches and our world by new ways. But what does this mean in practice? Serving the Gospel today requires a commitment to humankind, especially the poorest, the weakest and those marginalized. It requires from the churches transparency and accountability in dealing with the world, and with each other. This is a call for churches to work together so that we can all build a good future according to God's heart, a future in which all human beings can experience life, peace, justice, and love.

Prayers this week for Unity

- Monday – we pray in unity to end racism, sexism, ageism and discrimination in all forms.
- Tuesday – we pray in unity to end violence in all its forms.
- Wednesday – we pray in unity to end damage to the planet in all its forms.
- Thursday – we pray to end poverty and misuse of humanity in all its forms.
- Friday – we pray in unity for the Church and its mission in all God glorifying forms.

For more information and resources see <https://geii.org>.

Jays & Concerns

We extend our sympathy to...

- **Bill and Sherry Marble** on the death of Sherry's daughter, **Mary Jean Austin**, on January 8, 2022.
- **Jason Gordon**, a member of our staff, whose father died at the end of December.

**The men of the church
gather for prayer
each week on Fridays
8:30 AM on Zoom**

Finance

Financial Update

BY MARK SCHOEFFMANN, CHAIR FINANCE
MSCHOEFFMANN@MCHSI.COM

Contributions

Contributions in December to the Operating Fund were \$42.7K more than in 2020 and \$55.1K more than the budget at \$126.2K. The Year to Date total is above last year by \$3.2K and above the budgeted amount by \$25.5K. These figures include prepaid pledges (those paid in the year prior to the budget year) that are prorated over the year with 1/12 added to each month's contributions. Including all revenue sources, at the end of the year we have received 105.1% of the expected year's revenue.

Expenses

Year to Date expenses are \$33.4K above the budget at \$1,079.8K and more than in 2020 by \$67.4K. At the end of the year we have experienced 103.2% of the expected year's expenses.

Balance

Considering all sources, revenue exceeds expenses by \$66.0K for the year which is \$24.2K less than at the end of 2020.

Restricted Funds

In addition to contributions to the operating fund there was \$9,765 donated last month to special offerings and funds restricted to specific purposes such as missions supported by our church. This included \$2,560 to the Christmas Offering and \$2,095 to the Advent Offering.

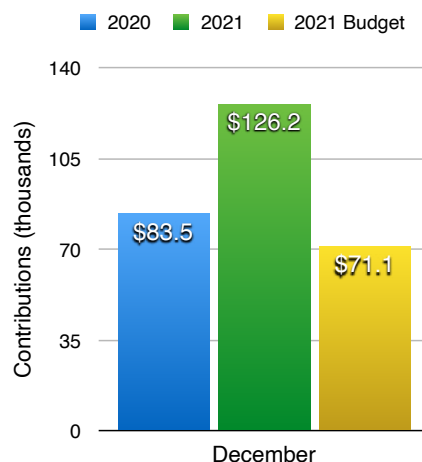
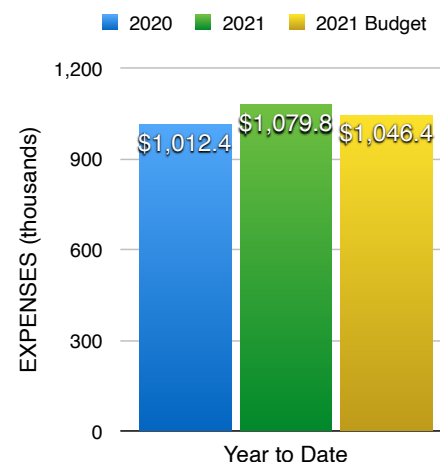
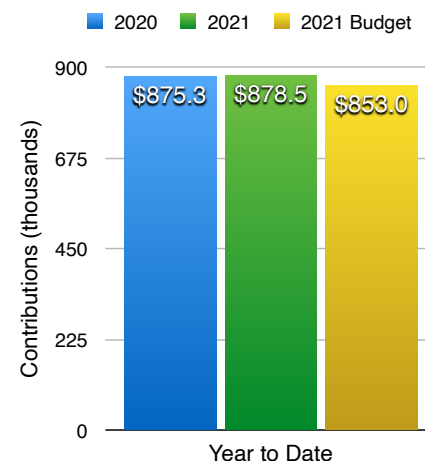
Stewardship

We have received 145 pledge commitments for the 2022 budget in the amount of \$762,483. This compares with \$780,118 in commitments for 2021.

Thank you to everyone who has submitted their commitment for 2022. If you have not yet submitted your pledge commitment please prayerful consider your ability to support the continuation of our programs and ministry. You may respond by completing and mailing a pledge card or online at <https://www.firstpres.church/pledgecard>.

Thank You to Staff and Committee!

As I rotate off of Session and complete my fifth and last year as Finance Chair I want to thank the office staff and the Finance committee for all their help. I especially want to thank **Ann Petry** and **Marcia Franks** for their work in making the financial reports and stewardship programs possible and **Byron Kemper** for his great help in getting me up-and-running when I became Chair as well as being a valuable resource ever since.



**Annual Reports
from Committee Chairs
and Group Leaders
are now due!**

**Please send your report
electronically to
marcia@firstpres.church**

Been to the Manger

A Maggie Henry Story

BY MATT MATTHEWS, PASTOR/HEAD OF STAFF
MATT@FIRSTPRES.CHURCH

When Maggie Henry saw the flashing lights in her rearview mirror, her first thought was that she'd never been to jail. Her throat went dry. Here it was the Sunday before Christmas and she was just now finding her way into the real meaning of Christmas. She thought that she was on her way. And now this.

She and her nephew and niece had set out after church in search of a Christmas tree. Thomas had just turned five. Claire was seven. They had had lunch at a cafe on route 13, then headed up towards Accomack, but couldn't find any tree lots that had a single tree, not even a discarded Charlie Brown tree. They found Christmas wreaths. They found paper bags filled with bunches of mistletoe. They found roasted chestnuts. But none of the tree sellers had any trees. The sellers said it was the most unusual thing they'd ever seen, that here right before Christmas to be sold out of trees. They said they were expecting a truck from Maryland or Carolina by Tuesday with fresh ones. They didn't seem to feel too panicked about the situation. They seemed to like whiling the time away around the fires in barrel drums without the bother of customers, the encumbrance of actual work. They didn't seem too worried about it.

But Maggie was worried. Very worried. She had been promising her nephew and niece that when they came to visit her from New Jersey in December that they would help her pick out and decorate a great, big tree. The kids were staying with Maggie while their parents went to some marriage inventory weekend

right out of Red Book magazine. The magazine outlined a marriage tune-up that required three nights without the kids. Maggie recommended that her sister and brother-in-law stay at Pavilioned in Splendor, an artsy bed and breakfast in Cape Charles; they could inventory all they wanted there with a good view of the Bay and the best seafood breakfast gumbo on the Eastern Shore. When they agreed, Maggie jumped at the chance to keep the kids. And those little ones had been talking about a tree since they arrived at her place Thursday night. There would be no Christmas, real or otherwise, without that tree.

Boy Scouts had a tree business in the parking lot of the Methodist church in Accomack. In the absence of trees, they tried to hawk lanyard necklaces and peanut butter pine cones. Maggie bought some necklaces for the kids but really needed a tree, she told them. They suggested she drive through Daugherty; an old farmer there used to grow trees as a sideline. If he didn't have any, she should try their rival Boy Scout troop in Onancock. It was almost four o'clock. She left tire marks in the church driveway.

There were plenty of trees in Daugherty but they were all attached--and no tree lots. She did a sloppy u-turn in the middle of the small road, slinging gravel into the ditches.

"Are we in a hurry?" Claire asked. She sat in the front seat of Maggie's dented Thunderbird seizing the arm rest with both hands.

"We're on a quest for a tree," Maggie said, lightly pounding a drum roll on the steering wheel. She forced a smile in Claire's direction. "These roads are a little small for my car, aren't they?"

Thomas sat strapped in the back seat, hands above his head like he was on a roller coaster.

She could find no lots in Onancock so she drove south to Cape Charles. Members of the VFW auxiliary had a tree lot in the fair grounds. They were selling friendship cakes and garlands and handing out organ donation bumper stickers; but they didn't have any trees and they didn't know where Maggie could get one unless she cut one herself. But the fading light would be soon gone, they said, laughing, so she'd better find a saw and a tree soon.

In the booth at a combination truck stop, general store, and tourist trap, Maggie treated the kids to chocolate milkshakes. A spoon full of sugar, Maggie thought. She tried to get the kids warmed up to the idea that they might not get a tree after all, and wouldn't it be just as fun to bake cookies and make a roaring fire in the fireplace? That would be fun, the kids agreed, but what they wanted to do was to decorate Maggie's tree. Maggie wanted that, too, and she could feel Christmas slipping between her fingers. She couldn't stand it when her plans got tangled. She felt the heat rise to her cheeks.

"Well, wouldn't it be more fun to go Christmas Caroling?" Maggie asked.

No it wouldn't, they agreed. Thomas nervously wiggled his loose tooth back and forth, back and forth. His lips were ringed with chocolate. Claire said that she had been looking forward to decorating Maggie's tree all week long. Thomas, with tears forming in his round eyes, said that he had been looking forward to decorating Aunt Maggie's Christmas tree for his whole life.

Claire said, "Why don't we just cut one down like that nice man said?"

"I'm afraid your Aunt Maggie doesn't know much about cutting down trees," Maggie said.

"I do," said Thomas. "You just get a saw and cut it down. It's easy. It takes muscles."

Thomas clinched his fists, held up his arms, and started making straining sounds. Maggie blinked with alarm. Was this some epilepsy that hadn't yet surfaced?

"What's he doing?" Maggie asked Claire.

"He's flexing his muscles," Claire said.

"I got hot dogs in my muscles," Thomas said through clinched teeth. "Feel 'em."

Maggie felt his bony arm under his winter coat. She pulled him over onto her lap. He relaxed into her warmth. The kids would have a great night without a tree, Maggie knew. She'd be able to get their minds onto other things. But what about hers?

"All we need is a saw," Claire continued. "Or an ax. My mom says you can do anything you want if you just set your mind to it. My dad says you can do anything you want if you have the right tools."

"Well, kiddos," Maggie said, "we lack the proper tools. We don't have a saw. Or an ax."

"Yes we do," Thomas said, pointing. Hanging on the peg board at the far wall next to maps and insect repellent and cheap fishing rods were hand-

held pruning saws. And leaning in the corner Maggie could make out, much to her chagrin, what she thought were ax handles.

* * *

Maggie had no idea that the barren field down the winding side road near the Bridge Tunnel entrance was the Eastern Shore National Wildlife Refuge. Maggie had no idea that cutting down trees on a National Wildlife Refuge was a federal offense. Maggie had no idea that the park closed at 4 o'clock. Maggie had no idea she was trespassing. The park ranger made those things perfectly clear.

"Why didn't you go to a tree lot, lady, like everybody else?" he said, innocently enough.

"They don't got no trees," Thomas blurted out.

"They don't have any trees," Maggie corrected. "They're sold out. I've been everywhere."

The ranger had asked them to step out of the car and stand in the high beams of his truck. Maggie reached for Thomas' hand which was becoming blue in the cold. The sky was beginning to darken to violet over the ocean. And towards the bay, yellows and oranges were melting into shades of gold and red. Geese, in a ragged chevron, strained north, honking. Were they laughing, Maggie wondered? Were these geese laughing at her trying to find Christmas in this field of twisted elder trees and pine, laughing at her sparing no cost to make these children happy?

The ranger walked to his truck and pulled out a pad from his glove box.

He'd have to write Maggie a ticket, he said. He was sorry. In all of his years of park rangers he'd never run into anyone ever stealing trees. Poaching, yes. Illegally camping, many times. But never chopping down trees.

"It wasn't trees," Maggie said, weakly. "It was just one tree. A single tree."

"A tree," he said, eyebrows arching "that belonged to the citizens of the United States, not to you."

She felt herself stiffen. All she wanted was a stupid tree. All she wanted was for this Christmas to be perfect.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I'm really very sorry."

He said he didn't know what the maximum fine was for chopping down trees on a National Wildlife Refuge, but he suspected it might not be more than \$500. She'd be notified in the mail. He wrote down her license plate number and looked at her license. She signed the ticket. He gave her the pink copy. He pulled a neatly folded handkerchief from his back pocket, looked away, and quickly blew his nose. "Tis the season," he said, refolding the handkerchief and stuffing it back into his pocket. Maggie was shaking with embarrassment. Thomas was shaking, too. He was afraid. And he was cold, Maggie knew. He was madly wiggling his loose tooth.

When the ranger took the tree from Maggie's trunk and began to put it into his truck with the flashing gold lights, Claire, hands on her hips, asked him what he was doing with her tree.

"I need this tree for evidence, little lady," he said.

"I'm not a little lady," Claire spat back.

"I'm a kid. And that's my Aunt Maggie's Christmas tree."

"Come on," Maggie said.

"That's our tree, Aunt Maggie!" Claire said. "We cut it down ourselves and it's ours. We're going to decorate it tonight. We've been waiting all Christmas to decorate your tree. It's our tree, Maggie. Ours. It's, it's---"

Claire melted into tears. Maggie knelt down onto her knees and enveloped her niece in a hug. Together they both cried and cried. They cried without any thought of ever stopping. The ranger took off his hat and scratched his head. The geese continued their honking. The sun continued its setting. The gold lights on the roof of the cab kept flashing, throbbing. The tree that belonged to all of America lay motionless, scrawny in the back of the ranger's pick up. Night sounds began to rise from the distant stand of Wax Myrtles like song, sad and lonely.

"Aowwww!" Thomas screamed at the top of his voice like a coyote, as if he had suddenly turned wild or gone mad.

Maggie scrambled around on all fours to see what was the matter.

Thomas stood with tears streaming down his face. And between the thumb and pointer finger of his outstretched arm he held his first pulled tooth, shining white, like a pearl.

* * *

The ranger's name was William. When he handed Maggie the ticket, for some reason, she noticed that his nails were neatly trimmed. His hands were chapped.

"I have to cover my---" He glanced over to the kids. "I have to cover myself," he said, nodding towards the ticket. "There's no way to hide that stump." But he let Maggie and the kids keep the tree. In fact, he carried it himself in his truck the seventeen miles to her house.

William took his shoes off just inside the front door, setting them neatly by the entry table. This made her immediately nervous but only slightly so, and curious. When he leaned over, Maggie noticed a circle of freckled scalp through thinning hair. She found herself noticing a lot. Besides her brother-in-law, a man close to her age hadn't been in her house since she moved in. He had cut himself shaving recently. His smile came easily, something she hadn't noticed out in the field. He smelled of cedar and salt. Had good teeth. When he spoke, his subjects agreed with his verbs. Nice guy. Clean.

"Are you from around here?" Claire wanted to know. Before he could answer, she pulled him over towards the empty spot in the living room where the tree would go. "Do you want to stay for dinner?" He pulled a hand out of his pocket and scratched his head, looking to Maggie. "There," Claire said, pointing to the empty spot. "It goes right there."

"Aunt Maggie doesn't cook," Thomas said, "but we have left overs. And she gets lots of food from cans and boxes. Do you have Nintendo at your house? A Play Station?"

"Where's your gun?" Claire said. "Don't rangers have guns? Have you ever killed somebody for stealing a Christmas tree?"

He helped them shake the spiders out

of the tree on the front sidewalk. They got it cinched into its stand. Maggie brought the vacuum cleaner in. He vacuumed. He helped them test and string the lights. They trimmed it after a quick dinner of heated up Chinese from We're Only Hunan.

William was single, they learned. He was 40. Called himself a lapsed Methodist, meaning he didn't attend often. And, no, rangers don't usually carry pistols.

Maggie had a feeling that she might be seeing him again. A trip to the refuge in daylight would be nice. She'd been up north to Assateague Wildlife Refuge but had not yet made it South to the Eastern Shore Refuge. She would make it a point to see him again. But tonight he had to rush away back to the park. A bus load of bird watchers from Richmond was coming in the next day and he had a lot to get ready. And Maggie and her niece and nephew had a tree to decorate.

Thomas liked doing the tinsel. Claire loved the delicate glass ornaments, and hung each with care. They drank hot tea and snacked on store-bought shortbread. They set a big fire in the fire place. The kids stacked and restacked the presents under the tree. Every now and then Thomas would shuffle off to the kitchen to look at his tooth which they had safely sealed in a plastic baggy. They put Bing Crosby and Mannheim Steamroller and Handle's Messiah and Lyle Lovett and Art Garfunkel and The Muppets into the CD player.

Maggie was exhausted. Was this Christmas, the moment of having everything done and nothing left to do but to wait? Maggie could wait to see William again. She would wait for her sister and brother-in-law to pick up the

kids in the morning. She would wait for the Friday night Christmas eve service at Community Presbyterian Church in Evidence Gap on the Ocean side of Virginia's Eastern Shore. Maggie was contented to wait. The future held promise, and it would come, and she could wait. And even if the elusive Christmas-card Christmas never came to her, she'd survive. She'd never known one before. She was naive to want one now.

She looked at the children. She remembered Christmases as a child when her parents would fight, slamming doors, screeching tires. After the divorce, there were Christmases in two houses, separate but not equal. Maggie's mother died when she was in 10th grade, and she missed her now but couldn't picture her face. She closed her eyes, straining to see. At least, Maggie thought, she was giving little Claire and Thomas more than she ever got this time of year. Her plan wasn't a total failure. But was this Christmas? Was this all?

She sat practically dazed on the floor, leaning against the couch with a child under each arm. She wasn't used to this feeling, childless and never before married. It felt okay, this being a weekend sort of parent, if she could just get over being so tired.

Maggie could have sat and enjoyed the smell of fresh pine, the popping of the fire, and the rainbow-colored Christmas lights on the finished tree until bedtime. But it was seven o'clock—an hour before their bedtime—and the kids wanted to do something else. Between the kids' visits she always forgot how short their attention spans were. And she always forgot how tired she got when they were around. Maggie couldn't imagine

another activity.

"Let's play dress up," Claire said.

"Yeah," Thomas said, bounding to his feet.

Maggie couldn't move.

"I have just the thing," Claire said. "Come on, Thomas." They disappeared down the hall toward the bedrooms.

When they came back, they had pushed before them a big cardboard box stuffed with clothes and hats and scarves. It was a box of things Maggie had been collecting for the church clothes closet.

"I thought you wanted to play dress up with your dolls," Maggie said.

"No, Aunt Maggie. Let's dress each other up like the wise men and shepherds."

Maggie didn't budge from her spot on the carpet and offered no argument. With wonder, she watched Claire and Thomas dress each other up like shepherds and sheep and angels. Thomas took a long, orange scarf that Maggie had unevenly crocheted a few winters back during her sewing stage and he wrapped it around his head like a turban. He was a wise man. Claire pulled a tie-dyed dress over her head and knotted it on the right side at her waist. She was the drummer girl.

Pretty soon, Maggie had mustered the energy to get to her hands and knees and was in on the game. She dressed Thomas up like old Zechariah, and Claire like Elizabeth. They looked up the characters in the Bible. Maggie asked the kids about each of the characters and filled in the gaps with what they didn't know.

Zechariah was a priest, Maggie explained, reading the notes from her Oxford Annotated Bible. The angel's name was Gabriel. Betrothed means engaged. The drummer girl isn't in the Bible, Maggie explained. Neither was the little drummer boy. But using one's imagination is fine, she said. Drum away.

Thomas was Caesar Augustus, turning blue in the face and flexing his hot dog muscles. Claire was the innkeeper. Thomas stuffed arm loads of clothes under a big University of Maryland sweatshirt and swaggered about, bloated; he was the bull in the stable munching straw. Claire wore a pink sleeveless silk blouse that Maggie had bought to go with a sexy evening suit that never fit right; Claire with her milky arms was a beautiful dove flitting from rafter to rafter above the holy family. They decided Maggie should be the donkey. They dressed her in a full length, woolen coat that belonged to her ancient grandmother still living in Harrisburg, buttoned it to her chin, turned up the collar and made Maggie clomp around the carpet on all fours. They demanded rides and tried to feed her chocolate kisses from outstretched hands.

Thomas put on a bathrobe that flowed behind him halfway across the room, stood at attention in front of the tree and said, "Guess who I am."

"We could never guess," Maggie said.

"I'm Joseph!" he said.

Claire began digging through the clothes. She put on a man's white dress shirt that Maggie had bought for her father last Christmas. It wasn't his brand and he wouldn't wear it, he said matter of factly. She took it home

to return it, but stuffed it in a bottom drawer instead. Her stubbornness came naturally.

The shirt swallowed Claire. She put on her lanyard necklace from the Boy Scouts in Accomack. She brought her praying hands together in front of her, then froze in a pose with a faraway look in her eyes, nose cocked to the ceiling. "Guess who I am," she said through the side of her mouth, trying not to move.

"I don't know," Thomas said, "but it looks like you have to go to the bathroom."

Claire glared at him and shook her finger. "You stop it." She resumed her stance, folds of white cotton shirttail gathered around her feet like a pool of soft light. "I'm Mary," she said.

The scene looked nothing like the manger, of course. And Thomas and Claire looked nothing like Mary and Joseph, Maggie thought, except in one profound way. They both had expressions of genuine awe and joy on their faces, and faces must have looked a lot like that at the real nativity. Maggie wasn't sure how a holy moment actually felt since she had been out of the religion loop since high school, but this might be it. This stirring in her had nothing to do with Christmas trees or with baking cookies or with a perfectly choreographed weekend. The feeling appeared out of nowhere, like a birthday check in the mail from an aunt.

Maggie stood up. Clothes were strewn around the living room like wrapping paper on Christmas morning. It was nine o'clock. Maggie stretched and looked through the picture window to her neighbors' houses across the street. She didn't decorate her yard

with lights but she was glad they did. Those lights reminded her that maybe it was true what she'd been hearing in church, that God's love shines in the darkness, in the cold, through the ages.

"Who are you?" Thomas said, looking up at Maggie.

Maggie was sleepy and overly warm and had forgotten their game of guess-who. She didn't follow his question and was unaware of the toboggan on top of her head.

"Who are you?" Claire joined in. "Are you the angel?"

"Oh no," Maggie said. Maggie didn't believe in angels. Not real ones. It was hard enough just to believe in God. "I'm just your Aunt Maggie. I'm just me."

But something was ever so slightly different about her. She couldn't put her finger on it. She didn't feel like she had a fever. What did it feel like, she wondered, for Moses to stand on holy ground? She was probably just overtired.

She thought back to a business trip to Santa Fe. She drove her rental car on a free afternoon to El Santuario in Chimaya. People from all over came there to dust themselves with holy dirt, then they hung up their crutches on the wall, and walked away. What a farce, she thought then, the possibility that people felt touched by God when they rubbed dirt on themselves that the priests got from the field out back. It seemed less far-fetched to Maggie now as she stood there in her living room covered head to foot in a droopy wool coat with padded shoulders and a red toboggan hat. Who was she to rule out God touching folk in odd

ways? She turned to look at herself in the dining room mirror. She looked like a holiday condom.

If God ever did speak to her, what might God say? Be saying? She dared to wonder. Get a plastic tree next year, Mag. Maggie's mind was swimming. I can't spell everything out for you, you know. She needed sleep.

She heard the children talking. Thomas had gathered his arms around one of Maggie's legs, had, in fact, curled his whole body like a horseshoe around it. She was too tired to bend down and pick him up. His weight held her down as the movement of the planets caused her slightly to sway.

"We love coming to your house Aunt Maggie," Thomas said through a yawn. "You should really have us over more times."

"We would come," Claire said, rubbing her eyes with one hand and reaching for Maggie's hand with the other.



**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH** OF CHAMPAIGN

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9 AM Worship/Sanctuary

10:15 AM Sunday School

11:15 AM The Gathering/Chapel

Online Worship is also available at 9 AM on Sunday mornings thru YouTube, Facebook, and our church website. Go to FirstPres.Live.

Contact the church office for more information.

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Send submissions to marcia@firstpres.church.