

PASTOR'S BLOG 2015

May 28, 2015 - "Flags For Prayers"



Dear Saints,

While we are enjoying a glorious and much-awaited spring, I am also aware of the suffering that is occurring around our country and our planet. I am concerned about California's unprecedented drought. I am deeply concerned the about the increasing gun violence in communities and schools and shockingly regressive riots as a result. I am highly disturbed about the growing instability within the Middle East and the ever-changing relationships with the US. I am shocked at the rapidly-spreading influence of ISIS, and I am also alarmed, as I learn how technology that is both helping teenagers learn, as well as carry out, inappropriate behaviors.

Henri Nouwen, a prolific author once wrote **"When God looks at the world...God must weep"**

Adding, now to our list of grief is the devastation in Nepal after an enormous earthquake — leaving (at this writing) over 5,000 people lost. At least we can take some heart that we are donors to **"One Great Hour of Sharing"** (again this year \$3500 strong!) which funds Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. Here's what the PC(USA) website posted the day after the quake:

"Presbyterian Disaster Assistance's (PDA) local partners through ACT Alliance have been working in Nepal for several years and are on the ground assisting many who have survived the quake by distributing immediate life-saving supplies such as water, food, shelter and

medication.”

WELL DONE, GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANTS....

Crises and disasters ‘hit us’ all differently depending on our familiarity, locale, and personal connection. We may have family or friends who live where the trouble occurred. We may have traveled there, studied it, know someone who is a native, or just been intrigued by a culture so different than our own.

For me, Nepal and the Nepalese culture has always been a place and a culture I am drawn to. I am intrigued by the work of the Sherpa’s and their spiritual and physical strength. I am drawn to the Dalai Lama’s wisdom and the monastic life of Tibetan Monks.

Weirdly, just a few weeks ago, I received a mailing from the “Campaign for Tibet”. I don’t know how I got on the mailing list and I almost tossed it, but since I have a heart for this culture I opened and read the enclosures. There was a plea letter asking to support religious and cultural freedom of the Tibetans and a ‘personal’ letter from the Dalai Lama. There was also...*a gift for me to keep.*

No doubt many of you have received these types of pleas. Often the ‘gift’ is a sheet of return address labels, a sticker for your car or a pen. Not this letter. This gift was unique, and something I have been curious about, for a really long time. I’ve seen (it) them often in films or in photos and even in person.

They were the Tibetan prayer flags. I now understand that they are tangible prayers reminders of what Tibet desires for themselves and the world; peace, compassion, strength, and wisdom. They are visible reminders of what God desires for us, ALL OF US.

We may not have ‘prayer flags’ but we have a chance every moment of the day to **pray**. When you water your garden, **pray for California**. When you watch a violent TV show, turn it off and **pray for our schools** and our communities. When you see your child replace relationships with technology, **have a family dinner**. When you start to malign others, don’t be part of the problem...**be part of the prayer**.

I think if we flew flags for the world to see, they would say “...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” (Is 2:4)AND...

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together... and a little child shall lead them. (Is 11:6)

*Praying with you for God's world,
Jen*

May 31, 2015 - "Looking Towards a Skinner Summer"



If you were blessed enough to experience Music Sunday this year you were reminded and likely awed at the amazing depth of talent we have among our worshiping community. The 'embarrassment of riches' that we have however, does not stop with the bells, the choir, individual soloists, musicians, artists (!) and readers (and their leaders). It includes people who are terrific planners and leaders of meaningful events from coffee hours to comedy nights, financial experts and fun-loving Sunday school teachers, devoted Deacons and enthusiastic Elders, mission-minded hearts and hands and grateful gardeners and skilled and devoted staff who manage all the important details to keep this church so fresh and vibrant!

We are also quite blessed to have retired clergy who worship among us. We are honored to have four who worship with us when they can and/or when they are not called away to help another church who needs their gifts.

This summer this church will also need the gifts of seasoned, skilled and faithful pastors to companion and help lead the church while I take some much-needed time away for respite and rejuvenation. If you haven't yet had a chance to get to know the Revs. Lorrie

Rowland-Skinner and Sherm Skinner, you're in for a treat. Here's a brief bio of them both:

The Reverend Sherman Skinner

Sherm grew up in Pennsylvania, the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers. A graduate of Wesleyan University and Princeton Theological Seminary, Sherm also served for three years in the U. S. Army. Sherm served three churches over a span of 37 years; First Presbyterian Church of Chili, Rochester, NY; Sugar Creek Presbyterian Church, Dayton, OH; and the Lawrence Road Presbyterian Church, Lawrenceville, NJ. He also served as a commissioner to the General Assembly in 1978 and as moderator of the New Brunswick Presbytery in 1999.

The Reverend Lorrie Rowland- Skinner

A life-long Presbyterian, Lorrie is originally from Yonkers, NY and her church experience there informed and shaped her whole ministry. A graduate of Dickinson College and Union Theological Seminary in NY, Lorrie has served churches in Bedford, NY, Stamford and Wilton, Ct., Dayton and Yellow Springs, Ohio, and Trenton, NJ. Lorrie was the Associate Executive Presbyter of New Brunswick in Urban Ministry and was inspired to work with churches in various stages of transformation. She also pursued post-graduate work at McCormick Seminary in Executive Leadership.

In 2000, Sherm and Lorrie retired and moved to the Adirondack Mountains. There they each moderated Sessions of "summer parishes" and served as Parish Associates at Nicolls Memorial Presbyterian Church in Old Forge. They moved to Franciscan Oaks, in June of 2013.

Since David Letterman is now officially off the air, I will steal his 'Top 10 List' to share with you why the Skinners have been, are and will be such a great asset to our church this summer.

#10...When they visited us to 'kick the tires' they never announced they were clergy, they just said they were seeking a vibrant place to worship and grow

#9...They are highly experienced with all types and sizes of churches and have a combined experience of 69 years!

#8... After volunteering at Vacation Bible School last year they signed up again this year and agreed to lead it!!!!

#7... They sing in the choir and love it!

#6... They are deeply passionate about our church, THE church, and the un-churched

#5... At least one of them went to Princeton...

#4... They are local residents; Franciscan Oaks is their home

#3... They are a lot of fun!Where's there's laughter, you'll find Sherm and Lorrie

#2... They get the challenge of family/work/life balance; they have 8 children and 16 'grands' between them

#1... They have become great colleagues and friends of mine and I confidently entrust You...my dear Saints...comfortably to them.

*Thanking God for abundant talent and respite with you,
Jen*

August 4, 2015 - "Never Say Never"



Dear Saints,

It is our privilege to write this portion of The SPIRE for the next two issues, while Rev. Jen is away. Last month, she introduced us with brief bios for each of us. We'd like to share with you how we found First Church. We moved here in June of 2013. After getting settled, we started our "church shopping." Having moved from a community in Northern New York that had just two year-round churches—one Roman Catholic and one Presbyterian—we were kind of overwhelmed when we discovered that within a half hour of our home, at Franciscan Oaks in Denville, there were eight Presbyterian Churches. So we started our search. First we went to the Morristown church because of some exciting adult education offerings. Then, because we are a clergy couple, we attended two churches in our area that had clergy couple pastors. Wanting to be as open and fair as possible, we attended four more churches before finally coming to Boonton.

What we found here, and what kept us coming back, was creative and meaningful worship and preaching that truly spoke to us. We would find ourselves discussing the sermon in the car as we drove home after worship. And it wasn't just occasionally. Many were the times when we would just look at each other after the sermon with a "Wow!" kind of expression.

Well, it wasn't long before we were hooked! And then we began to get to know some of you in the congregation and we discovered a joyous warmth that seems to pervade this group of God's people. You began to make us feel more and more at home, which helped us realize we could easily make this our church home.

So here we are, not only in a new church home, but going back to work! God certainly works in mysterious ways. We failed our first retirement, helping our church in Old Forge, NY through a pastoral crisis before serving there as parish associates, and then serving for three months at Sherm's former church in Dayton, OH while that pastor was on sabbatical. So, as we prepared to make the move to New Jersey—to our second retirement—we were certain we would not be doing this sort of thing again, so we got rid of most of our ministerial resources—books and worship resources and old sermons! What's that old saying?... never say never?

We're learning that you just can't predict what God might have in store for you.

But we're happy to be here and happy as well, that we can help out in some small way as Jen takes a greatly needed respite leave. And we're honored by the faith and trust the Session has exhibited in us by inviting us to help out in this respite time. Our goal is to make this a seamless transition for these nine weeks, and to serve you, the congregation of FPCB, as faithfully and lovingly as possible. If there is anything we can do to make that a reality for you, anything that we might have overlooked or missed,

please don't hesitate to let us know. Our hope is that, as Rev. Jen experiences refreshment and renewal during her respite time, you, the congregation, will have your own sense of renewal and re-energizing for the work of ministry that lies ahead of us this fall.

***With great thanks for your friendship and trust in us.
Lorrie and Sherm Skinner***

September 19, 2015 - "With Thanks"



Dear Saints,

One of our favorite writers is Marilyn Robinson, a Christian who writes both fiction and non-fiction, with little about sin or damnation but a lot about forgiveness and tolerance and kindness. She portrays a world filled with divine grace even in the worst of circumstances. In her non-fiction collection, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, in an essay called "Imagination and Community", she writes, "I would say, for the moment, that community, at least community larger than the immediate family, consists very largely of imaginative love for people we do not know or whom we know very slightly.... The great truth that is too often forgotten is that it is in the nature of people to do good to one another." **Don't you think that describes our congregation?**

Reflecting on our summer journey in ministry with you, many thoughts come to mind and one is this gift of imaginative love. Robinson's conviction that the capacity to make imaginative connections with other people, familiar and not so familiar, is the basis of community. We have seen this gift in evidence here over and over, and our hearts are

filled with thanksgiving for God's grace in providing the spirit-filled support that we have felt all summer. In particular, we are so thankful for the rich conversations each Sunday and for all of the angels who hovered behind the scenes. We felt so fortunate to be able to work with a talented staff & congregation:

- **Sarah**, who, with all her musical talent, was also able to think about details and make appropriate suggestions;
- **Norma** who held everything together and made our time fun and easy, and who broke in a new sexton with ease;
- **Randy** — have you met him yet? Always smiling, so pleasant to be with, so careful in his work, giving this building great love and attention. Originally from Dominican Republic, he loves baseball!
- And many others:
- **the 30 folks** who made our Vacation Bible School a huge success with their enthusiasm and adventuresome spirit;
- **the Deacons** who so lovingly, considerately, consistently provided for so many people both within our congregation and in our community;
- **the Worship committee** who, in their attention to detail, provided outstanding support to these old and often rusty pastors;
- **the transition team** who provided feedback, support, and ideas;
- **the choir members** who were so willing to step forward and provide musical leadership in special services of worship;
- **those of you not named here** but who were always available, to share thoughts, ideas, and suggestions.
- **for the prayers** of those who were taking much needed time away.
- **and of course for Rev. Jen** and the session for inviting us into leadership and trusting us to provide loving support and spiritual sustenance in her absence

We hope that this summer season has refreshed your gift of imaginative love. Perhaps it has been what some would call a 'holy pause' when you have given yourself some space, some time, and some rest, with a change of scene or routine, a change of pace, perhaps a time to slow down. Our prayer is that we will all begin this month of September renewed and re-energized and ready for the many things we have to look forward to:

• OutdoorWorship • the beginning of Sunday School • the PWFall Gathering • Comedy Night • Boonton Day • and of course, Rev. Jen's return with all of her enthusiasm for ministry, her spiritual

sensitivity, her sense of humor, her warm and inclusive love for God, Jesus Christ, and this congregation, and her ability to operate the outdoor water faucet!!!

Honored to be serving in ministry with you.

♥ *Lorrie and Sherm Skinner*

October 1, 2015 - "Stretch Your Spiritual Fitness"



You may have noticed in the last 5 years or so that there's been an increased national awareness and focus on fitness, health and nutrition. It started in part with nutrition labels being available to those of us who want to track protein, carbs, sugars, fat (as well as see all the additives that make Kraft macaroni and cheese taste so good). Farmers markets are popping up in every town to promote eating 'fresh from the garden' as well as supporting local growers. Daytime talk shows now often have health segments, offer interviews with exercise experts and give healthy recipe alternatives to things like my beloved Kraft Mac. Even the NFL has developed an initiative called 'play 60' to encourage parents to inspire their children to be active 60 minutes a day. Now there's even a wristband to help people track their personal fitness. It's called a 'Fitbit'.

Fitbits original ability was simply to count the number of steps one takes in a day. The recommended goal is 10,000 steps which is about 5 miles of walking. This has become, for many, an effective measure of activity as well as a good way to inspire people to get to the gym or walk after dinner to get to their goal. When 10,000 steps have been accomplished, the Fitbit buzzes and flashes as a way of celebrating and congratulating the person arriving at the goal.

Newer Fitbits also have other features like calorie counting, heartrate monitoring, and assessing sleep habits. Fitbits are very comfortable and remain inactive/quiet on your wrist until you tap it, and then you can retrieve whatever information you are interested in knowing. I have a basic Fitbit (and when I wear it), I have found it helpful and a good way of spurring me on to keep moving toward the goal of 10,000 steps. However, I also notice that when I don't wear my Fitbit, I am much less likely to push myself to the gym (or even walk around the block).

Lately, I've been pondering "**what if** we had a Fitbit to measure our spiritual and fiscal fitness?" **What if** we had a bracelet that would monitor our faith journey and celebrate each time we intentionally entered into a 'workout' of prayer, study or stewardship? **What if** this "**faith-fitbit**" would encourage us after we had attended church just 4 weeks in a row? **What if** the "faith-fitbit" would also remind us how much we are contributing to the annual stewardship of the church versus our other life commitments? **I wonder what your "faith-fitbit" would tell you?**

Well, there is no faith-fitbit just yet but the Finance and Stewardship committee is working on new technology to offer on-line donations. **We are hopeful it will be live in Jan 2016.** But the question still stands, what if we had a device that we wore all day like the fitbit to alert us, remind us and spur us in to stretch, reach and increase the level of our fiscal and spiritual activity? **What if we a had a personal, private but positive 'help' to remind us of what is important to us and to God?**

For the 2016 stewardship campaign which begins this month, we have developed a fun and playful '**team competition**' approach to help support, spur on and remind everyone to **stretch** toward new goals of fiscal and spiritual health.

We will be grouping members by years of membership and see how the teams can compete to **STEP UP STEWARDSHIP** for 2016. We will unveil the plan and the teams in a few weeks including which team each of us will be on.

Stewardship is spiritual practice that often gets ignored but it doesn't have to be painful or a drudgery. Just like team sports it can be a great supportive and up-lifting experience! So please start praying and pondering how you want to grow and **stretch** your spiritual and fiscal fitness so that the church continues to thrive and have a very long life.

Getting in shape for Christ with you,
♥ **Jen**

November 7, 2015 "Turn, Turn, Turn"



This Sunday Nov 1st, we will be celebrating **All Saint's Day**. In this particular church, it is a time within worship when we remember those we've lost over the last year, who now rest with God. This has been a meaningful time not only for those who mourn the recently deceased but for all of us to reconnect and remember those who now enjoy the Heavenly banquet.

While the secular origins of All Saints Day are vast and wide, there is evidence (and some lore) that All Saints Day grew out of the Celts feast of 'Samhain', (pronounced SAH-win) which may date back as far as 1200BCE and marks the beginning of the 'dark half' of the year. The Celts believed this was also a moment on the 'turning of the year's wheel' which they believed to be a "thin place" where ancestors were especially accessible 'across the veil'. Over time it has evolved to celebrate both the final harvest and remembering the dead. It was observed throughout Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man traditionally beginning after sundown on October 31st through sundown on November 1st. This is also where we get Halloween from, or 'All Hallows Eve'.

Western Christianity, the Roman Church in particular, created the Christian feasts of All Saints (November 1st) and All Souls (November 2nd) to honor the profound legacy of wisdom that our ancestors have left to us. In Presbyterian terms, it is right and appropriate to 'honor' the profound legacy of wisdom our ancestors left us, especially because we understand ourselves as both children of God (Tekna Theou, in Greek) and the Priesthood of all believers, so the wisdom imparted comes from both our worldly ancestors but also God, the Almighty.

To take it a step further, if we are indeed honoring a profound legacy from our ancestors, then it makes sense to also include celebrating those in our congregation who we baptized this past year as well as remember/celebrate our own baptism. This act (which is an act of the whole worshipping community) both recognizes the gifts from God of the people in our lives, but the One, who gives our lives meaning, even in the midst of changes we experience through our faith journey.

This is wonderfully and succinctly defined in Ecclesiastes 3. It begins with ***“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die...”***

You likely remember the song: *“To everything , turn, turn, turn ...there is a season...turn, turn, turn...”* This was a popular song written by Pete Seeger in 1962 which the “Birds” covered into the #1 single in 1965. But here’s the cool part. Well, actually there are two. First, Seeger wrote this song to inspire world peace in the midst of the 60’s when there was tremendous national and world upheaval that ran the gamut from numerous civil wars, Vietnam War as well as growing nuclear threats. Seeger was doing his part to not only call attention to the need for peace but also he was calling us back to scripture, to God’s wisdom of the ages, (i.e., Ecclesiastes 3). FYI...Ecclesiastes is known as one of the wisdom books of the Old Testament.

The **second** fact is far more subtle. The only lyrics Seeger actually wrote of that entire song were the last line: ***“a time for peace, I swear it’s not too late” and the title: “Turn, Turn, Turn”***.

This Sunday Nov 1st, we will be celebrating All Saint’s Day. In this particular church, it is a time

within worship when we remember those we’ve lost over the last year, who now rest with God. This has been a meaningful time not only for those who mourn the recently deceased but for all of us to reconnect and remember those who now enjoy the Heavenly banquet.

Life is full of surprises. Some good, some not so good, but all are within the realm of **the gifts that God gives us all**. Turn back to God. Turn back to worship. Turn back to being part of a community that seeks to acknowledge the gifts and graces of life as we begin the lengthening of the nights and deepening of our faith.

Turning and re-turning to Christ with you,
♥ Rev Jen

December 6, 2015 - "Happy 'New Year'!"



HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!!

No, you are not reading an old SPIRE issue...

We are in **Advent** now and Advent, in the church calendar, is technically the beginning of a new year. The church year ends on Christ the King Sunday (usually the Sunday before Thanksgiving) and begins on 1st Advent (the Sunday that falls after Thanksgiving). Each year begins the next year/cycle of lectionary passages and they are broken down into three years;

A, B and C.

It might seem weird at first to imagine that we start the New Year on Nov 29th but if you think about it, it might make sense. New Year's Eve is usually about celebrating the blessings of the past year and giving hope to new resolutions and new beginnings.

Since we have all just finished enjoying a bountiful feast of Thanksgiving, we have hopefully paused, even for a minute, to give thanks to God for all the blessings of the past year. Post-thanksgiving feast, pushing back from the table, we have likely already started our resolutions (i.e., perhaps to not 'over-eat' this holiday season). As Black Friday adverts clamored for our attention, we also may have made a resolution about not going 'overboard' this Christmas. Or at least hope to keep our spending habits in line and giving gifts that are more thoughtful and/or more authentic.

Lastly, the beauty of New Years is that we can say good bye to all that was hard, hurtful or grief-filled and put hope in a New Year, which can be filled with promise, courage and faith.

That, my friends, is also the true meaning of Advent. **Advent is a season of preparation and waiting.** It is a season for all those things we want to witness, again or for the first time. The word advent is an anglicized word from the Latin word *adventus*,

meaning “coming”. So hope, promise, courage and faith are coming; they are literally on the way.

In the daily, sometimes hourly barrage of news headlines about terrorist attacks, planes being shot down, school shootings and civil unrest, we need a new year. **We need hope, promise, courage and faith.** We need hope beyond all hope. This however will not come by making the perfectly decorated tree, getting the perfect gifts for family and friends and whatever your vision of the perfect Christmas is.

It comes from gathering together and worshiping the God who brings love to us in an infant-child.

It comes from preparing our souls for the coming of the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

It comes from the Word, made flesh, and who is the ONLY ONE who can bring peace to the earth.

It comes from our hearts being willing to be the first to beat swords into plowshares and make spears into pruning hooks. It comes

from our words and prayers and actions that fight against nations lifting up swords against one another.

I hope and deeply pray that we all have a blessed NEW YEAR as we begin Advent.

I hope and deeply pray we all find more courage, hope and faith.

I hope and deeply pray that all your New Year's hopes and dreams are made evident in the arrival of Immanuel, God with us.

Celebrating the New Year with you while we wait for the Christ-child,
♥ Rev. Jen
