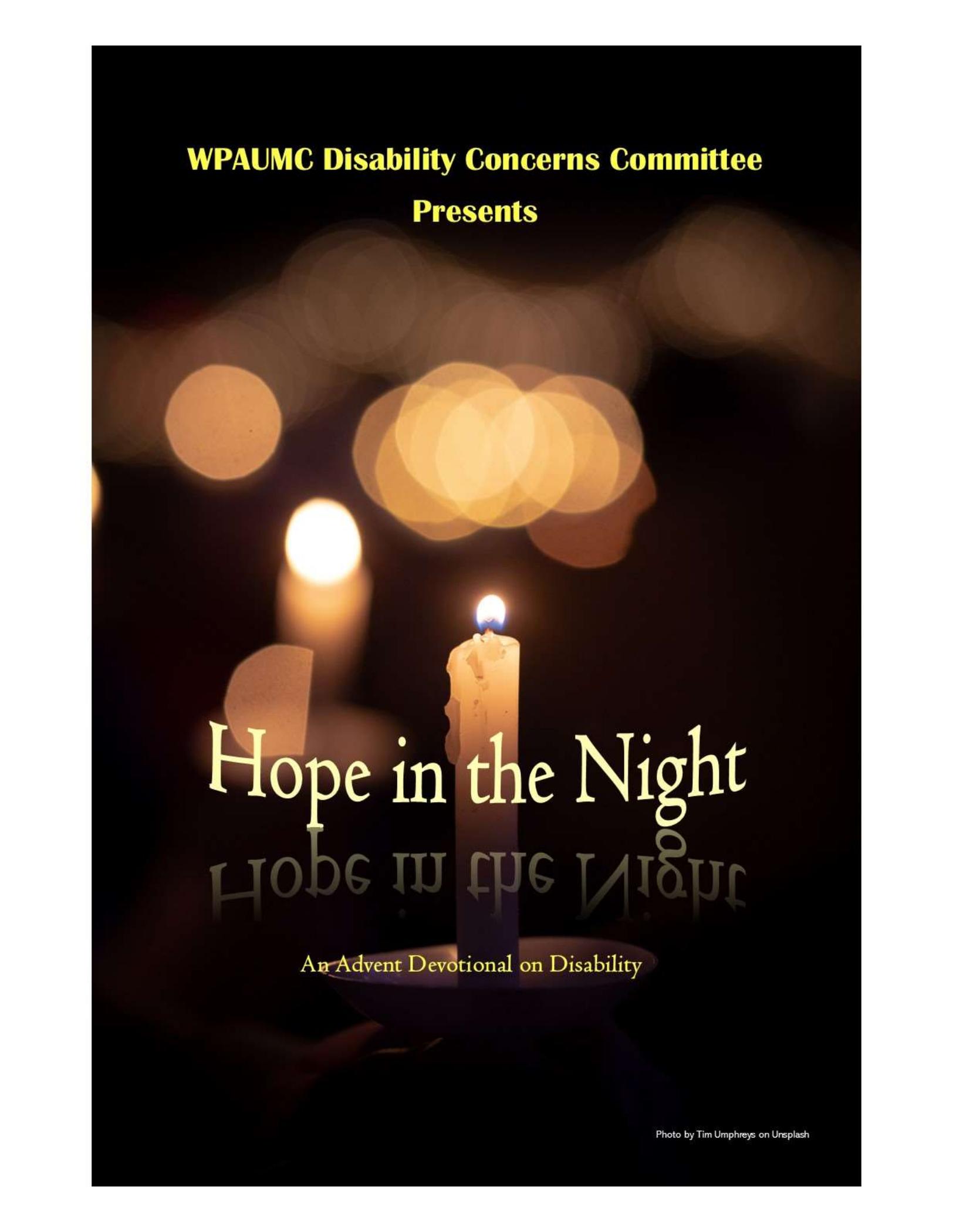


**WPAUMC Disability Concerns Committee  
Presents**



Hope in the Night  
HOPE IN THE NIGHT

*An Advent Devotional on Disability*

## **Acknowledgments**

The Disability Concerns Committee would like to thank everybody who contributed to this 2020 Advent devotional. We hope that it is as much a blessing for you to use and pray with as much as it was for us to write it. May God bless you during this sacred time in the midst of a difficult year.

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**Sunday, November 29**

**Glenna Wilson**

Chair, Poverty Team WPAUMC

Member

First United Methodist Church of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA

**Scripture**

Psalm 72; Isaiah 11:10-16; John 5:30-47; Revelation 20:1-10

**Devotion**

In JUST THIS Richard Rohr writes that Jesus didn't tell us to go to all the nations to save our souls or theirs. He sent us to "otherness" not to be the do-gooders who rescue those who are different from us, but for us to get out of our own selves, to truly love the Christ within those who are different from us.<sup>1</sup>

The Psalm affirms that God delivers those who have no helpers, and they are precious in God's sight. I need to step out and embrace those who are different, whom I don't understand, so I may discover the presence of Christ in them. As Fr. Rohr says, I must get out of my own assumptions, my Christian tribalism, and my own worldviews and meet them as my kindred. Not to convert or "save" but to know, to love, to respect; and even more I am to learn from them. It is only as I build real relationships with others that I am changed by their experience, ultimately by them.

In the last few years, I have been blessed by a close friendship with a woman who is blind. Spending time with her has taught me how to see without my eyes. Trying to describe a beautiful sunset, the color of her new shirt, or a toddler's behavior during the children's sermon has heightened my awareness of God in all of creation. Her ability to memorize the music harmonies in our choral music is amazing.

As we moved into this time of the pandemic, I experienced the pain of her isolation as she shared that the most important way of communicating for her is to touch. I have recognized that sharing life with someone who has gifts I don't have teaches me to be humble and to learn from those who are different. God is already within them. It is not my job to "save" them, but to learn how they have "saved" me, and to rejoice in the wonder of all that God creates.

**Prayer**

Loving Creator, as we approach the birth of Jesus, help us to see your birth in those who are pushed to the margins due to physical, mental, racial, or situational challenges. May we expand our circle of neighbors by stepping out of our comfort zones, trusting you to lead us, and bring our gifts to the manger of your love.

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<sup>1</sup> Rohr, Richard. JUST THIS, (Albuquerque NM. CAC Publishing 2017) p.123

**Wednesday, December 2**

**Rev. Erik Hoeke**

Senior Pastor

Avery UMC, Washington, PA

**Scripture**

Hebrews 1:1-4

**Devotion**

What I love most about Christmas is the theme of light coming into darkness. We all know the comfort of lighting a candle, flipping a light switch, or turning on the car headlights. Except, we don't all know what that's like. When you're blind, light means nothing. Darkness is all around.

A member of my church has been blind since she was a small child. She once told me a story of going with friends to an immersive experience that helped sighted people experience the total darkness of being blind. She recalls feeling frustrated when hearing her friends say things like, "Oh, I get it now! I understand what life is like for you! This is hard!"

"You don't have any idea what my life is like," she thought to herself. She appreciated their attempt to understand her disability, but they would never completely get it. Because once they finished the "experiment", they could take off the blindfold and go back to "normal" life. They had the privilege of living in the light, only entering the darkness as visitors. Meanwhile, a blind person lives in the darkness all the time.

What my parishioner told me was that when she went into the dark and unfamiliar room with her friends that day, she was better at finding her way around. Decades of being blind had honed her skills of walking through the darkness – skills her friends would never develop because their lives are played out in the light.

Darkness – whether chosen or thrust upon us – is limiting. It disorients us and forces us to find our way with different senses. But what I've learned from my parishioner is how to better navigate through darkness. As someone who's never lived with blindness, as well as other trauma I may never experience, she teaches me so much about how to find my way.

For her, Christmas themes of light and darkness mean nothing. Instead, she thinks about what it means to willingly enter someone else's world as her friends did many years ago. It was an act of solidarity and compassion, much like Jesus' entrance into our dark world. And in following his example, we must seek out the darkness in which others live. Not so that we might save them – only Jesus can do that. Rather, so that we may learn from them how to walk through the places where we cannot see.

**Prayer**

Lord, do not allow us to run from the darkness of Advent too quickly. Do not let us skip over it all and rush to the light. Help us to stay in the dark just a little while longer. Open our hearts to our neighbors who experience darkness all the time, more than we will ever understand. And through the dwellers of the darkness, teach us how to traverse through the places where we cannot see the way. Amen.

**Sunday, December 6**

**Rev. Larry Dunn**

Senior Pastor

Garden City UMC, Jacksonville, FL

**Scripture**

Luke 20:2, Isaiah 1:16-17

**Devotion**

Pandemics can be stressful. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been stressful for everyone. Fear and anxiety about this new disease has caused an overwhelming and strong emotional response from people at all levels of society. Coping with stress in a healthy way will make you, the people you care about, and your community stronger. The question is how do we cope with the stress of a worldwide pandemic from a Christian perspective? We don't want to be the "chicken littles" of this world racing around clucking, the sky is falling, the sky is falling!

Stress during an infectious disease outbreak can cause some of the following: Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones, your financial situation or job, or loss of support services you rely on; Changes in sleep or eating patterns; Worsening of mental health conditions.

It's not just the stress but the risk for suicidal tendencies that threaten us during these times of pandemic.

Different life experiences affect a person's risk for suicide. Feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, and other emotional or financial stresses are known to raise the risk for suicide. People may be more likely to experience these feelings during a crisis like a pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Trust in the only one with authority over all of these things. Jesus was confronted about the authority that granted him the power over the things that plagued the world in his time on earth. When addressed Jesus response was a question about our understanding of where the authority over all things originates.

When we get caught up in the stress of this world and the things that could give us reason to take extreme actions, we need to turn to God, the authority over all things. The passage from Isaiah gives us reason to focus on what is important.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>

In this difficult season take time to rest and know that God's got this. God's desire is that we find rest from our weariness. God's desire is that you find hope in the midst of hopelessness. Here the word of the Psalmist who says, "Be still, and know that I am God."<sup>3</sup>

**Prayer**

Almighty God, authority over all things, giver of life eternal; bless us with a peace that eases the burden of these times. Let us trust in you in a way that shows the world how much we trust you. Give us healing from the stress of this world that we might abide in your presence and draw strength from your peace! AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 46:10a NIV

**Wednesday, December 9**

**Michael DiMonte**

Member

St. Paul's UMC, Allison Park, PA

**Scripture**

John 9:2-4

**Devotion**

Many of us have been spending a lot of time thinking about and coping with the consequence of the pandemic. We lament our losses. Mine has been separation from my children, separation from the grands – that is the grandchildren, grand-dogs, grand-cat, and even the grand-frog (his name is Major).

Why is this happening, we ask? In our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives of digital devices, artificial intelligence, and travel by air bus, we love control. We are accustomed to knowing why things happen and how to fix them; the way we want them. “This is terrible, I can’t take it, I just want thing to go back to normal”. We have all heard these words, and felt then too. We want to be able to go to the Steelers game, take that trip to Europe we had planned, or even just have a normal (American) Thanksgiving, with the salty turkey, creamy mashed, and family from out-of-town packed around the table. This is such a burden; this is such a huge loss.

Let’s ask again, “why is this happening?” Has God allowed it to punish us? No, it is so that we can wake up and see the thousands of nurses struggling to save lives, and applaud them in the streets. It is to appreciate the medical and scientific gifts bestowed on us, and listen in awe. It is to value moments with family, and to connect all the more deeply when we reunite. He has allowed it so that our eyes may now be opened to the oppression we have perpetrated on those disabled by poverty, or race, or infirmity. Perhaps, it is to bring us out of our own 40 years of wandering.

It has been said that “the only disability in life is a bad attitude”. I pray that God will open my eyes, open my ears, and heals my disability; my attitude.

**Prayer**

Lord, we ask not for a cure to our limitations, but to a healing of our lives. Give us true life, a life that sacrifices, a life that loves, a life that understands, and a life that lifts up. Amen.

## **Sunday December 13**

### **Robert Wertz**

Member

Scalp Level: Trinity UMC, Windber, PA

### **Scripture**

Isaiah 64: 8

### **Devotion**

This single simple verse expresses a beautiful sentiment with its three short lines that everyone should have tattooed on their forehead. I had the privilege of serving the disability community for over twenty five years. I began working as a direct care aide for a private sector agency and then moving to a state run comprehensive Rehabilitation Center working in several different positions. I retired from a small state agency dedicated to a single diagnosis.

During the course of my career I served many hundreds of individuals and not one of those people was disabled. They were all just people created by God and needed assistance with something in their lives. I need assistance every day. In order for me to see clearly, I need to wear glasses. When I need something from the top shelf of the kitchen cabinets, I need to use a stepstool because I am not quite five foot six inches tall. When I go shopping I need a written list because at my mature age I don't remember more than two or three items and that is on a good day.

Over my career I have served people who are lawyers, school teachers at all levels, research scientists, business owners, IT people and people who are designing the next generation of computers. I have served heavy equipment operators, wood workers, house building contractors, secretaries, administrative assistants, accountants and sales staff of many varieties. And I have served those individuals whose intellectual level doesn't allow them to function at the speed of the average person but they still want to work and live independently. These individuals can and do do that with assistance.

I am not writing this to say "look at me." I am writing this using my experiences to say, "look at that individual, who has been labeled or placed in a special group, as just another person created by God with the same wants and needs as everyone else." The label is only to satisfy bureaucratic paper pushing. There is no disability community. There is only people created by God and they deserve to have their needs met. Some of these needs are being met for some of these people and some of these people are having none of their needs met. And that is unfortunate for the spiritual growth of our self and our spiritual growth as a society.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, just as we are thankful you gave us life, help us see that all other people are your creations and be thankful for their lives as well. Please guide us in ways we can help all people

meet their need for feelings of self-worth, their need for the respect of other people and the feeling they belong somewhere to someone. Help us to live like Jesus taught us. Amen

**Wednesday, December 16**

**Rev. Chad Bogdewic**

Co-chair, Disability Concerns Committee  
Associate Pastor of Outreach  
St. Paul's UMC, Allison Park, PA

**Scriptures**

Isaiah 2:4, James 3:6-9

**Devotion**

It is getting closer and closer to Christmas, and what a weird Christmas it will be. There is a pandemic, political unrest, calls for violence, and continued racial oppression. It is hard to be cheery when everyone is at each other's throats. It reminds me of the first Christmas and the world in which the Christ child was born; there was chaos, there was violence, there was infanticide, and the list goes on. But we as followers of the Incarnate One are called to another way, the way of love.

The love that is spoken of in Scripture is not the fuddy-duddy, twiterpated kind of love that Hallmark movies portray, but it is about respect, action, and ultimately the peace that God calls us to. Isaiah calls us to turn our weapons into gardening tools, essentially to take instruments of death and make them instruments of life (by providing nourishment). It is not enough to not kill, but we must provide life giving measures.

One of the most dangerous weapons we have is our words. Words can be uplifting or they can destroy. One of the most hurtful words in the disability community is the "R" word. This word, which literally means slow, has been used to dehumanize people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Using this word conveys the perceived stupidity and worthlessness of the person to whom it is aimed.

Words are important. God created the universe through words. Jesus is the Word of God come to us. Words should be used to give life and sustain it. As we once again worship the Living God who became flesh this Christmas season, let us use the words that God gave us to lift up, to love, and to bring joy to all people. Amen

**Prayer**

God of life and love, you spoke us into existence amid the tumultuousness of preexistent chaos. You ordered our life through your utterances on Mount Sinai. You drew us back through the preaching of the prophets. You save us through the Living Word, Jesus Christ. Speak to us again, Lord, that we may speak life to others to bring hope, joy, love, and peace. Amen.

**Sunday, December 20**

**Rev. Dr. Steven Tuell**

James A. Kelso Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament  
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, PA

**Scripture**

Luke 1:46-55

**Devotion**

A friend who teaches developmentally disabled children asked me what the Bible says about “those with different abilities.” A short, harsh answer would have to be, nothing—at least, nothing specific. To be sure, the Bible says a great deal about *physical* disability, but even passages which seem to refer to intellectual disability, such as 1 Thessalonians 5:13, where the KJV reads “comfort the feeble-minded,” or Proverbs 1:22, which appeals to the “simple ones,” are talking about spiritual weakness or willful ignorance, not about developmental disability. So, what about the developmentally disabled? Indeed, as more and more of us are living into old age and the incidence of dementia is on the rise, what about those whose intellectual abilities decline or are lost later in life? Where is God in the lives of those who cannot understand, or who can no longer understand, the words of the Gospel?

The psalm for the fourth Sunday of Advent is Mary’s song in Luke 1:46-55, sometimes called the Magnificat. In this song, Mary celebrates God taking the side of the weak and the outcast: “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:51-53). Mary’s son Jesus, her song affirms, would come for all of us, even—indeed, especially!—for those the world calls the least. Jesus identifies with us to the point of sharing our suffering, our weakness, even our death, and in so doing fills even our darkest places with divine light. As the great Christian author George MacDonald wrote, “the Son of God suffered unto death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be more like his.”

In Jesus, God comes to stand with us in our weakness, whoever we are and whatever our weakness may be. Our relationship with God depends not on our right understanding—if it did, how could *anyone* be saved?—but on God’s love and grace. The cross of Jesus, as Paul affirms (Rom 5:8), is the proof of God’s love for us, which holds nothing back. In Christ, God is with us whatever need we face. In Christ, God assumes all our disabilities into Godself, transforming the place of our deepest need into the place of God’s most abundant grace.

**Prayer**

Thank you, Abba, that your love and grace meet us, not at our place of greatest strength and ability, but at our place of deepest weakness and need. Teach us to show that love and grace in

our relationships with one another, and give us humility to listen to and learn from those our world calls least. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**December 24, 2020**

**Rev. Jim Sands**

Senior Pastor

Scalp Level: Trinity UMC, Windber, PA

**Scripture**

John 3:16-21

**Devotion**

So often it seems persons with disabilities are presented as secondary characters in someone else's story. Lieutenant Dan is there to show Forrest Gump the power of overcoming adversity. Helen Keller is there in "The Miracle Worker" to show us the boundless determination of Anne Sullivan in her efforts to communicate with Helen. Even those with disabilities in scripture often seem to be there just to be healed by someone. Disability is seen as a challenge to be overcome by someone else's efforts.

In my own life, as the father of a child with mental and physical disabilities, I will often hear from well-meaning people how we were "given" our son because "God gives children with special needs to special parents." As if my son is in my life as a test of my own character and faith. I get the sentiment. It can be quite difficult to care for someone with a disability, especially your own child. As humans, we seek to find meaning in the randomness of life. If something is tragic or unexplainable we seek to find a deeper meaning. A child born with disabilities must have been born for some deeper purpose. The child is a challenge to be overcome in the life of the parent, a secondary character in someone else's story.

None of this is true, of course. My son is his own person, - unique and made in the image of God. A parent of a child with special needs is a parent with some challenges that other parents do not have, but our children are loved by God just the way they are. Our children may be inspiring as they work to overcome their challenges, but that inspiration is not the purpose of their life. Certainly my son inspires me every day. But his purpose is for him to decide as the main character of his own story. If anything, I am a secondary character in his story, there for a season in his life as he grows and matures into the person he was created by God to be.

God gives each of us a life to live. Along the way, we each can challenge and inspire others. Some of us have challenges which are greater than others, but our lives are no more or less valuable because of our situation. Each of us is made in God's image. God loves the world God has created, with the fullest expression of that love being revealed in God's coming into the world in the person of Jesus. Jesus took on flesh and revealed the strength of God in human weakness. In Christ, we all are part of God's story of redeeming love for the world.

**Prayer**

Wonderful Counselor, we know that all children were born with a purpose, but your Son came with a specific purpose. Let us keep that purpose of Christ in our hearts and minds as we celebrate love that You have for us by sending your Son, so that we may live in love of you and our neighbors. Amen.