



JANUARY 2024

the Messenger

✧ THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA ✧ ESTABLISHED 1698 ✧

Thinking Theologically

Conversations Worth Having Returns on February 17th

Happy New Year!

I am going to resist the urge to do what I customarily do, which is to urge you to be gentle on yourselves when applying the resolutions. (I urge this because, statistically, resolutions are virtually certain to become sticks with which we may beat ourselves.)

No, this year, I want to push us to think theologically, and I have a particular topic, and date, in mind. Our next *Conversations Worth Having* will be February 17. Please mark your calendars!

The particulars are still being worked out, but our pattern has been to have a Saturday seminar, followed by our visiting scholar preaching on Sunday.

Our guest speaker will be Dr. Brian Blount. Dr. Blount is one of the world's leading experts on the Gospel according to Mark, the book of Revelation, and a topic known as *Cultural Hermeneutics*.

Let me explain that last one, because it is important for us. For a long time, Biblical scholars privileged what is known as the *Historical-Critical Method* to interpret scripture, and it is exactly what it sounds like: we use what we think we know about the historical context and the literary structure of a text to determine what we think the author meant. This is the way I was trained as a scholar. But, it

neglects a key factor that a cultural hermeneutic will address. Dr. Blount will explain this far better, but we always bring the totality of ourselves—our lived experience—to bear when we read the Bible. It is impossible not to: someone who is sick reads the passages about healing with a different understanding that someone who has always been healthy. Someone who has been marginalized will see things that a privileged person will miss. Enslaved people interpret the *Magnificat* differently from rulers...and these insights are vital to interpreting scripture. That alone would be worthy of our attention.

But, I have become increasingly concerned about a problem in American culture, and I've asked Dr. Blount to address it: *Christian Nationalism*.

A healthy faith uses the lens of the gospel to understand life. For instance, we should all use our faith, our understanding of the Gospel, to interpret what we see in the political sphere. That's reasonable. That's good.

But when that formula gets distorted, the script is flipped: our politics become the lens through which we may interpret the Gospel. That's bad, because *the Gospel becomes subordinate to our politics*.

I want to be very clear: Some of the sharpest critiques of *Christian Nationalism* are coming from conservative Evangelicals. Dr. Blount would like us to read two pieces ahead of the seminar:

nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness-ncc/the-dangers-of-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states-a-policy-statement-of-the-national-council-of-churches/ and redletterchristians.org/condemning-christian-nationalisms-role-in-the-january-6th-insurrection/.

I also want to be very clear about another thing: it is vitally important to me, as your pastor, that our church remains a place where a diversity of political viewpoints are welcomed and respected. That commitment from me will never change. But we must also be a place where a topic isn't off-limits just because it risks upsetting anyone's viewpoint. We are called to love one another enough that we can risk bringing our whole selves into conversation. That's the idea behind *Conversations Worth Having*.

We can't be siloed into camps of like minds. *That isn't Christian community*. And neither can we declare there are parts of life that are off limits to faith. *That isn't Christian discipleship*.

So, as your pastor, I am asking you to bring your whole selves to a serious conversation about Christian Nationalism. Dr. Blount is an expert in understanding how we bring our whole selves to understanding the Bible, and I want us to have the best guidance as we consider matters of utmost importance. Please look for registration details in the weeks to come.

—Baron Mullis



LECTIONARY

JANUARY 7
Baptism of the Lord
Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

JANUARY 14
1 Samuel 3:1-20
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
1 Corinthians 6:12-20
John 1:43-51

JANUARY 21
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Psalm 62:5-12
1 Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

JANUARY 28
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

Adult Christian Education

At its last meeting of 2023 on December 6, the committee gratefully acknowledged the outstanding work done by Carol Cook (Co-chair), Barbara Chaapel and Diane Rogers, who left the committee at the end of 2023.

Following the successful completion of Advent offerings—the Sunday morning Dream series and midweek Bible study—the Adult Education Committee is working on programs for 2024. Looking ahead, the following programs are already scheduled.

- ▶ On Sundays February 25 through March 10, Dr. Heath Carter will lead programs designed to follow up on the February 17 “Conversations Worth Having” seminar that will be led by Dr. Brian Blount on Christian Nationalism (see adjoining article).
- ▶ On Sunday, April 7 there will be a program on gun violence prevention in connection with the Soul Shots exhibit in Old Buttonwood Hall during the month of April.
- ▶ On April 21 Doug O’Malley will lead a celebration of Earth Day which is on April 22.

We are working on the program for the remainder of the year.

The Committee is considering the time for Sunday programs, and we want to hear from you! What time is most convenient and when are you most likely to attend? Options for Sunday programs are 9:45 AM or following Fellowship Hour at 12:30 PM.

Members can help in making this decision by contacting any member of the Committee or emailing Allan Schimmel (schimmela@comcast.net).

Adult CE Committee members are Elaine Hanby, Rebecca Melley, Rev. Ken Ross, Allan Schimmel (chair) and Roberta Tarbell.

—Allen Schimmel

The Mary and George Schneider Speakers Fund

Pastors need the ability to invite scholars to speak on important topics, and sometimes the need for these scholars doesn’t line up neatly with our annual budget cycle. So, shortly after I became your pastor, an anonymous gift of \$10,000 was pledged to establish a fund that would enable me to do just that: to invite experts in a field of study to come and be theologians-in-residence for First Church. That became the basis for our *Conversations Worth Having*, which has brought in scholars to teach on the topics of how we treat our finances as people of faith, and how we recognize and address implicit bias as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Following the death of Mary and George Schneider in May of 2020, the donors sent a request to the Session via our treasurer, that the fund be renamed in memory of the Schneiders, as they were always among the most devoted participants in all of our adult education offerings. The Session unanimously approved. We honor George and Mary’s legacy by taking our faith seriously enough to educate ourselves in order that we might think theologically. I hope we will remember Mary and George’s commitment to First Church as we engage in our common life of faith by learning together.

—Baron Mullis

Twenties & Thirties Group



In December, the T&Ts volunteered at Books Through Bars and supported our 2023 Giving Tree. We also gathered with the fpcQ and Gen X crew for a festive Christmas party. Thank you to everyone who join us to serve and celebrate!

We’re planning two gatherings in January 2024:

- **Sunday, January 21st — January T&Ts Brunch**
Join us in the new year for our monthly brunch outing on Sunday, January 21st after the 11 AM service! Please RSVP to Laura (youngadults@fpcphila.org) if you’d like to join!
- **Friday, January 26th — T&T Board Game Night**
We will be gathering at Sydney Cardy’s place at 22nd and Arch for a cozy night of board games. If you love a board game or simply love company, we’d love to have you join us. Please RSVP to Laura (youngadults@fpcphila.org) for this event as well.

You’re invited the T&T Facebook Group facebook.com/groups/FPCTandTs or email Laura Colee (youngadults@fpcphila.org) to stay informed about upcoming events!

You can also be added to our T&T Whatsapp chat here: chat.whatsapp.com/JsNRBQANKal311nRdP5fdE.

—Laura Colee, Associate Pastor

Children's Education

December was a busy month for Children's Christian Education! We hosted a very successful **Kids Night at FPCP**. Eight children participated and had a delightful time eating pizza, making crafts, and arguing about which holiday movie to watch. One of our Nursery Childcare Providers, Sharese Smalling, and Laura Colee, served as chaperones that night. Parents also gave the event strong marks, despite being barred from participating themselves. We plan to repeat this event in the coming year.

We also completed our **Advent series of activities** with the children, all of which had a service element.

- On December 3, we decorated cards which were sent to FPCP members who were homebound or who might otherwise be having a difficult time.
- On December 10, the children made ornaments and decorated the Christmas tree.
- On December 17, they decorated cookies to share with Wintershelter. *Special thanks to João Magalhães for baking over 100 cookies!*

Also on December 17, the children received their Christmas books! The children were extremely excited about this event, and some even helpfully opened others' presents! Presents for those who were not in attendance will be delivered or mailed. *Special thanks to Karen Marston and Reagan Buzan for ordering and wrapping all those books!*

As we welcome a new year, we invite children to join us for Sunday School each Sunday after our Celebration Service from 9:50-10:30 AM in Old Buttonwood Hall. See you soon!

—Laura Colee, Associate Pastor



Striving for Energy Savings

First Church is always striving for energy savings, both to reduce our carbon footprint and to minimize building-related expenses. As a member of the local District 2030 program, we have a goal to cut our energy footprint in half by the year 2030 (compared to last year, when we joined the program).

ELECTRICITY:

New LED bulbs in Old Buttonwood Hall (OBH), first floor hallway ceiling lights, and chandeliers in the first-floor offices, as well as new insulation in the attic above OBH and the 2nd floor offices have helped to reduce electricity consumption 24% this year through November, versus 2019, the last complete year before the pandemic. This reduction corresponds to about \$1,500 in savings at our current rate for electricity supply. Total 2023 electricity costs are expected to be \$9,500, as compared to \$10,800 for 2022, a 12% reduction. All the electricity consumed at First Church is from renewable sources.

NATURAL GAS:

Saving money on natural gas is more difficult without investing in energy infrastructure. FPC's cost for natural gas (heating and hot water) is about \$20,000/year. To target areas of savings the Committee is monitoring the consumption per heating degree day (CCF/HDD). In 2023, we qualified for over \$1,600 in PGW "Energy Sense" rebates to defray costs for two projects: the OBH attic insulation and a new, more efficient HVAC system for the Pastor's office. Currently, we are reviewing and adjusting the temperature set points in the sanctuary and offices to continue towards our energy savings goals.

During 2024, the Building Committee plans to review energy usage for the whole building complex. The Committee welcomes any persons interested in helping First Church to achieve additional energy savings.

—Karl Miller, for the Building Committee

Member News

New Members

On December 10, we welcomed 8 new members to First Church. They include:

- Joyce Brill
- Ashley Brunk
- Sydney Cardy
- Richard Davies
- Alicia McDonald
- Gerry Rice
- Alan Southergill
- Christine Southergill

We are looking forward to introducing you to them in worship in January and in upcoming Messenger newsletters.

2023 New Members Invited to Party!

We invite all of our 2023 New Members to Save the Date for our **Annual FPC "We're So Glad You're Here!" Party**. The party will be on **Tuesday, February 20** in the evening at Bill Swoope's house. More information to come soon.

—Laura Colee,
Associate Pastor



Member Spotlight: Get to Know Josh Banks

In 2016, Josh Banks moved to Philadelphia to attend Drexel for a master's program. At the time he was looking for a church that had an active young adult group, and he found that First Presbyterian had just what he wanted.

Josh grew up in Baltimore and attended a Baptist church as a child. At age 13, his family started attending a Presbyterian Church, and he has been a member ever since. His parents are both from the midwest and his paternal grandparents moved up from the south during the Great Migration. Josh has a sister and brother-in-law who are medical doctors and have made South Philadelphia their home since 2020.



Josh's educational background is quite impressive. His undergraduate degree is in Physics from the University of Chicago and his first Master's Degree is in Biophysics from Vanderbilt. He then graduated from Drexel with a degree in Biostatistics. Josh's career in Biostatistics at Jefferson involves helping different types of researchers such as medical doctors and epidemiologists analyze health data from their studies. In addition, he teaches introductory biostatistics at Jefferson as an adjunct professor.

Even more interesting are Josh's interests and hobbies. His ability to speak Spanish, French and Italian has been useful as he loves to travel and has visited such places as Canada, France, Mexico, Italy, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Argentina. But Josh's most intriguing

interest is dancing. He dances both Salsa and Bachata, a dance form that originated in the Dominican Republic. He also dances Kizomba, an African dance that developed in Angola and then its modern forms were developed in France. His interest in these dances began through Spanish-speaking people he met in Philadelphia. In the Spring he plans on dancing in both Belgium and the Netherlands.

At First Pres, Josh has served as a Deacon since 2019. During his time here, he has certainly enjoyed all the gatherings in which he has participated with other members of our congregation. Make sure you get to know this fascinating member of our church community.

—Josh was interviewed by Linda Deis

Our **"Member Spotlight"** feature invites people from the congregation to do a short "bio" about another member. It's a way for people in the church to connect, reach out, and "interview" the person, and for all of us to get to know one another better! If you are interested in writing a member spotlight about another member, please contact Patti Sassoli (communications@fpcphila.org).

Missions Update

“Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty” (quote from Thomas Merton). As we transition from the celebrations of Christmas to the season of discovery and revelation, we continue our call to love and serve others with refreshed energy. In December, the Missions Committee explored opportunities to support two organizations: Child Houses and Valley Youth House’s Achieving Independence Center. A presentation for Child Houses occurred and was well-attended by FPCP members and families as well as families outside of the church community. Child Houses is a non-profit organization that provides medical, educational, and social emotional support for Syrian children who have lived in devastation and tragedy. Additionally, the conclusion of the Giving Tree yielded many presents for teens and young adults being supported through the Valley Youth House’s Achieving Independence Center. Thank you for all your contributions!

January brings the beginning of a new year and various opportunities to support the greater community. In recognition of Martin Luther King Day, various events related to social justice and community service will be occurring through the city of brotherly love. Stay tuned for activities offered through the church! Additional resources regarding MLK Day of Service may be found below:

- African American Museum of Philadelphia: www.aampmuseum.org/calendar.html
- University of Pennsylvania: aarc.upenn.edu/mlk
- Museum of the American Revolution: www.amrevmuseum.org/events/martin-luther-king-jr-weekend-2024-at-the-museum
- AmeriCorps: americorps.gov/newsroom/events/mlk-day
- Volunteers of America: www.voa.org/
- NAACP: naacp.org/take-action

Here are additional volunteer opportunities:

- **Winter Shelter**
Volunteers are needed in the evenings as servers for the Winter Shelter at Trinity Memorial Church at 22nd and Spruce streets. Please contact Laura Colee if you’re interested in learning more information or signing up to volunteer.
- **Volunteer Opportunities with Zia**
Zia needs your help! Zia is in need of paper grocery or shopping bags to put meal kits in. If you have extra paper bags, please drop them in one of the marked blue boxes in the narthex or by the 21st street entrance. Volunteers are needed to either help deliver produce and groceries to the church on Friday mornings; pack meal kits; or deliver meals to families in Philadelphia on Saturday mornings.

Penn's Village

Neighbors together—connecting, engaging, thriving

Penn's Village Launches a Series of Culinary Programs

On a chilly afternoon in early December, it was delightful to settle into IBX Live, the beautiful demonstration kitchen in the Independence Blue Cross Building on Market Street, for a cooking demonstration and tasting. Aliza Green, the well known Philadelphia chef and cookbook author, talked about her culinary travels as she prepared a Portuguese soup and kidney bean salad along with a Tunisian spiced zucchini spread. About 50 people looked on, made notes of her tips, and finally enjoyed tasting all that Aliza had prepared.

Save the date of January 18 at 2:00 PM for the next program in the Penn's Village series: **How to Survive the Flu Season with Superfoods!** It will again be held at IBX Live, Independence Blue Cross, 1919 Market Street. An announcement will soon appear on www.pennsvillage.org and you can either register online or call 215-925-7333.

To learn more about Penn's Village, watch our new Welcome videos that also appear on the home page. They are a lively portrayal of the Penn's Village community and highlight the benefits of membership and opportunities for volunteers.



For more information, visit the website <https://ziafood.org/> to sign up directly or reach out to Rose at rose@ziafood.org.

- **Accommodations for Patients**

Hosts for Hospitality is looking for people to accommodate patients and their families who are staying in the Philadelphia area. They are seeking those who have space in their homes or second properties so patients and their families can stay in the area while they are being treated. Please, visit their website <https://hostsforhospitals.org/> if you are interested in hosting.

Please continue to check the website and weekly announcements for events coming up in the month of January.

—Jordana Woodford, for the Missions Committee

FPC Gen X Brunch



SUNDAY, JANUARY 28TH
after 11am worship

Gen-X Brunch Sunday, January 28!

We want to invite all Gen-Xers (born between 1965–1980 give or take) to join us for our first ever **FPC Gen-X Brunch after worship on Sunday, January 28!** Why should the T&Ts and Band of Boomers have all the fun!? If you're interested in joining the Gen-X brunch, please RSVP to Laura Colee (laura.colee@fpcphila.org).

—Laura Colee, Associate Pastor

Scan the QR code

Text FPCPHILA to 73256
using your mobile device, followed by
your contribution amount.

FPCPHILA \$100

@firstpresphilly



2024 Annual Giving Update

Our pledge drive for 2024 Annual Giving is ongoing. As of December 28, we have received 86 pledges for a total of \$357,925. Thank you to everyone who has pledged! If you have not yet pledged, pledge cards are available in the pews or in the narthex. You may also pledge online; scan the QR code or visit fpcphila.org/make-a-pledge.



Audio Podcasts Available

First Church is pleased to offer audio podcasts of our traditional worship services and sermons! Search for "First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia" in your favorite podcasting app to find and subscribe to our podcasts. Use these links to listen on Apple Podcasts:

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**First Church
Facebook Page**



Please submit all information for the February issue of The Messenger to communications@fpcphila.org by **Monday, January 15.**

The First Presbyterian Church IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

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