

Hopes & Fears

of all the Years



Christmas at McFarlin

Join us for Advent!

Dec. 1

Advent Festival, 3pm
Handbell Concert, 6pm

Dec. 3

United Women in Faith
Christmas Program, 6:30pm

Dec. 6

Grinch Family Movie Night,
5:45pm

Dec. 8

Centennial Celebration Sunday
8:30am & 11am Sanctuary
11am Modern

Dec. 15

Birthday Party for Jesus, 9:40am
Candlelight Carol, 6pm

Dec. 22

Sweaters & Sing-a-long, 11am Modern
Blue Christmas, 1:30pm Sanctuary

Dec. 23

Christmas Eve Eve, 6pm Modern

Dec. 24

Christmas Eve Services, Sanctuary
4pm Family, 7 & 11pm Candlelight

Scan the QR code with your camera for a full calendar of all things Advent!
mcfarlinumc.org/advent2024





Pastor Rockford Johnson

December 1, 2024

1st Sunday of Advent

“Hopes and Fears of All the Years” is our Advent-Christmas theme for this, our centennial, year. That line from the Christmas carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem, reminds us that Jesus is born in a particular town and time as a particular person. The story of shepherds with sheep and a humble birthing room also emphasizes a coming into the real stuff of life. That particularity assures us that our current hopes and fears are felt and helped by God, that God cares about the real-life situations of our world, our lives, and our church. Through all the 100 years of McFarlin, God has inspired hope and calmed fears.

Rev. Phil Fenn was senior pastor here for twenty-two years, retiring in 2001, and is still active among us. His time at McFarlin spans nearly half of our first century. This centennial Advent book revives reflections that he wrote for the McFarlin newsletter during those years as pastor (1979-2001). I believe we will discover insights that transcend the years and bless us as we celebrate the coming of the everlasting light among the dark streets and bright lights of our lives in 2024 and beyond.

May you and all in your circles of love and connection be blessed this Advent with the hope that dispels fear and brings you peace.



December 2, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 2, 1994

While floating around during the Advent Festival a mother stopped me to say, “Your sermon this morning provoked a discussion in our house.” I said “Oh?”

“Yes. You spoke about the wise men. The children came home from Sunday school sharing the news that the Bible doesn’t mention how many there were.”

“That’s right.”

“The kids tell me we have merely assumed there were three because of the three gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh.”

“Right again. Matthew only refers to wise men, plural. For all we know there would have been two or twelve.”

There are several points to the story. In addition to the ones I mentioned in the sermon we could add: (1) It is an act of wisdom to humble ourselves before Christ, and (2) Christ deserves the best we have to offer. For the Magi “the best” was a trilogy of costly gifts. For us “the best” is a costly or sacrificial offering of another trilogy of gifts—time, talent and money.

December 3, 2024

UWF Christmas Program, 6:30pm

Phil Fenn Reflection

Nov. 11, 1988

On Sunday evenings I preside at our vesper services, and it gives me an opportunity to ask for testimonies. A simple question is asked,

“How has God touched you this week?”

My testimony Sunday night was related to our communion service. I am always in a quandary about whether I should avoid looking at people as they come down the aisle, or whether I should try to greet them with my eyes. I catch myself doing both—sometimes bowing my head, sometimes looking to see who is coming.

My testimony? It is touching to see our people kneel at the altar to receive the sacraments. I know some of the victories, some of the struggles. Indeed, I know of some of the resentments and hurts. But, when we kneel at the altar the congregation visibly appears to be a family of faith, and I personally feel more like a pastor than in any other experience of ministry. It is just plain remarkable that so many people from so many backgrounds and involvements come together for the purpose of willfully humbling themselves before something larger than themselves. I find myself thinking what Jacob expressed in one of his religious experiences: “Surely God is in this place!” However, I also add the thought, “Only God could cause something like this to happen.”

December 4, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 20, 1991

"Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh." (Matt. 2:11) From the very beginning the discovery of Christ has elicited the response of giving. In fact, the deeper the understanding of his significance, the deeper the response.

The wise men must have been possessed of a profound understanding because they opened their treasures to him. They were generous! There are some obvious lessons in the example of the magi:

1. To acknowledge the meaning of the Christ is to feel summoned to give. Some say they believe, but don't give. I don't believe they believe, really. They may have a mild mental assent, but they are certainly are not possessed of a life-gripping faith.
2. Giving is not an option for Christians. It is more like the reflex action of faith. We must give in his name. The only questions are, How much and to what?
3. We are not to give merely a tip. We are to open our treasures. One way of translating that into modern terms is: Strive toward the tithe.

December 5, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 6, 1991

When my children reached those roller coaster years called teenagehood, I found myself giving them the same admonition every time they went out: "Have a good time! Be careful! Don't do anything dumb!"

Well, happily, my kids have made it safely into young adulthood, and often they demonstrate parent-pleasing poise and maturity. It is my own maturity I have begun to worry about.

Last week, because we couldn't get the kids home for Thanksgiving, Gloria Jean and I decided, almost on the spur of the moment, to hop in the car, drive to Chicago, meet the kids, go out for Thanksgiving dinner, get back in the car, and drive home. I would hesitate to openly acknowledge the expense of all that—gas, motel, Thanksgiving meal. For a guy who regards going to the cafeteria as a grand family outing, this trip was quite an extravagance on my part.

There is another way of looking at it. Love is not always practical. This four-day-sixteen-hundred-mile trip can best be described as an expression of the strength and extravagance of love. We just wanted to see the kids.

December 6, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 6, 1991

This is the season of love—Christmas. We sometimes fail to feel the message because it is presented in such pious terms. You know, “God so loved the world, etc.” Or, “Love came down at Christmas, etc.”

Maybe you can hear the message with new feeling if you receive it in these terms: The mother-father God, parent of us all, once said, “I want to be with my kids.” As a result he drove 800 miles to Chicago (Bethlehem). When he got there he thought to himself, “I’ve really gone out of my way to pull this off, but this is what it’s all about—being a family and glorying in the bonds of love.”

Wishing you to glory in the experience of being loved by reciprocating with the spontaneity of your own love.

December 7, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 23, 1994

The first time in my ministry Christmas day fell on a Sunday we were in my first church. There were three people present. Even the kind couple who invited Gloria Jean and me to Christmas lunch with their family failed to come.

I was so deflated and disgusted I insisted we drive to a larger town and find a congregation to worship with. We ended up in the Presbyterian church.

Actually, I am sympathetic, especially with the young family. If the family “Christmas tree” is on Christmas morning, it is a double hassle to get the kids ready for church, or even persuade them to go to church. We have been through it several times. In fact, the real saint in our house on Christmas Sundays was not St. Nicholas, but St. Gloria Jean. I always escaped to the church early, and only had to worry about the sermon. Gloria Jean had to dress, tug and tow a couple of Christmas-distracted kids to the sanctuary. In regard to the young families who make it this Sunday with their kids in tow—well, I’ll do everything I can to arrange some extra credit for you in heaven.

Join us tomorrow, Dec. 8, during worship for our Centennial Celebration Sunday!

December 8, 2024

2nd Sunday of Advent
Centennial Sunday

Phil Fenn Reflection

March 4, 1989

Can children get anything out of worship?

In his *Memoirs of Childhood and Youth* Albert Schweitzer offers the following observation:

“From the services in which I joined as a child I have taken with me into life a feeling for what is solemn, and a need for quiet and self-recollection, without which I cannot realize the meaning of my life. I cannot, therefore, support the opinion of those who would not let children take part in grownup people’s services till they to some extent understand them. The important thing is not that they shall understand, but that they shall feel something of what is serious and solemn. The fact that the child sees his elders full of devotion, and has to feel something of their devotion himself, that is what gives the service its meaning.”

That comment doesn’t solve all the problems parents cope with when they insist that their children accompany them into worship, but it does offer some encouragement. I am proud of those families who make worship a family affair, and I very much want to believe that though the sermon shoots over the heads of children, perhaps there is, after all, something about the service which influences them for the better.

December 9, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

July 25, 1986

She was young. Wanted to join. But, she didn't want to come down "in front of all those people." That's the way it is supposed to be done — publicly. It is a way of witnessing. Yet some people do get terribly nervous at the thought of standing in front of the McFarlin crowds.

We chatted. I was touched by her sincerity. It seemed to be one of those situations in which an exception to the rule should be made. "Meet me at the altar after church," I said.

"I'll be glad to take you into membership then." She did. We chatted. I prayed. The question was asked. She cried, "I've been wanting to do this for a long time," she remarked. It was as though she was saying, "I've come to see that serious discipleship requires membership."

Amen! It does. To be a follower of Christ we must become involved in the organization which strives to understand and promote his ways. To take Jesus seriously we must take the church seriously.

December 10, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Aug. 8, 1980

Worship should be an offering to God as well as an edification for the people. My Protestant, non-Sacramentarian, sermon-centered tradition has caused me to emphasize the “edification” side to the neglect of the “offering” side. I am preoccupied with, “What will be meaningful to the people?” This Sunday, however, I gained an experiential insight into worship as a majestic offering to God.

We joined 1,500 worshipers in St. Paul’s Cathedral, London. The liturgy of the Anglo-Catholic tradition has been used here since 604 A.D. The cathedral itself is a gargantuan showpiece of Renaissance architecture and artistry. Just standing in the precincts helps one understand how such phrases as “the beauty of holiness” and “high and lifted up” could come into being.

Communion was received to the accompaniment of Haydn’s *Nelson Mass* offered by the St. Paul’s Chamber Orchestra and a consummate choir of approximately fifty voices. The music and the chants echoed throughout the cathedral, creating that medieval monastery sound.

For the first time I understood worship as something OFFERED to God. The classic liturgy, pageantry, and music, arising from one of humankind’s marvelous religious monuments, was a mosaic of beauty. It was worship as an art. If God has any aesthetic sensitivity at all, God must have been pleased to receive what was OFFERED.

December 11, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 19, 1980

I was out in the Christmas rush this past weekend. The air was festive because of the conspicuous Christmas decor and music, but not everyone was caught up in a joyful mood. I witnessed one rude incident and was on the receiving end of a curt remark. It wasn't personal. We didn't even know one another. It was most probably the result of Christmas fatigue: the anxiety of trying to do too much in too little time and having to contend with too many people. It is unfortunate that the pressure of getting everything done often leads us to betray the spirit of good will which we are supposedly celebrating.

The lesson: what we celebrate on December 25 has implications for our public behavior during those preceding count-down days.

Being a SCROOGE while buying gifts of love is an odd way to keep Christmas. Remember your Christian identity while you shop.

Grace and peace.

December 12, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Nov. 23, 1990

In referring to our church, one of the happy phrases we have fallen into using is “family of faith.” Although one could make the case that the Biblical understanding of the church must always include familial dimensions, the phrase wasn’t prompted by theological perspective. It was more a reflex action of personal feelings. It’s just the way I experience McFarlin.

When I hear:

- a nursing home resident saying, “Hi, Phil,”
- a third grader bouncing into Wednesday choir greeting me with, “Hi, Phil,”
- the youth group raising the rafters with their tape decks,
- of members rallying around one another in time of crises,
- Sunday school classes studying and socializing together,
- the congregation beaming with pride over our children’s participation in worship,

Well, all this, and more, has a family feeling to it. Maybe those warm fuzzies stem from the fact that I have been here for a spell, and the longer I stay the more lives I enter. Or, maybe, it is all due to the fantastic vitality of our congregation’s life and its inter-generational composition. Whatever the reason, “Blest be the tie that binds!” We are a family. I hope you feel it. If not, come on in. Get a little closer. It’s great.

December 13, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 14, 1984

Christmas Offering



Every year it has been my hope that our cumulative collections and receipts would be such that we could give the ENTIRE Christmas offering to some special cause. However, this has never been possible. We have found it necessary to use the “Christmas special” to help with the mission obligations we accepted. Coming up with the money to meet these obligations is, in my opinion, a moral obligation. Others are depending on us.

We are doing better this year in our cumulative receipts, and for this reason at least a part of my dream will be realized. For the second time in the past six years the Finance Committee has approved the use of a portion (one-third) of the Christmas offering for a special cause—World Hunger. What will help? Money!

Your money (Christmas offering) will help confront the problems of hunger/poverty from every conceivable angle.

***Scan the QR code above to give to this year's christmas offering!
100% of 2024's Christmas offering will go to the McFarlin Food Pantry.***

December 14, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 17, 1993

A religion professor said he knew so little as a child that he believed the Christmas story just as it is told in the Bible. Then there came a time when he knew so much - after studying biblical criticism, comparative religion, and philosophy—that he could not believe large portions of it, especially the miraculous components. But now, once again, he knows so little that, without getting hung up on the details, he believes in the “singularity” of Jesus, i.e., that Jesus cannot be explained without appealing to mystery and miracle.

His comment illumines a common discovery. Some parts of personal faith are rooted in wonder, not reason. There simply is no way, for example, to explain how the cosmic force whom we call God could become incarnate in Jesus. It defies analysis. What it stimulates is not the “Ah ha” of rational insight, but the pause of awe.

Join us this Sunday for worship through wonder—a reverential pause before the miracle of Jesus.

Join us tomorrow, Dec. 15, at 6pm for Candlelight Carol!

December 15, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 13, 1996

3rd Sunday of Advent
Candlelight Carol, 6pm

Christmas marks the birth of Christ. But when was Christianity born? The two leading contenders are: (1) Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2, and (2) Peter's confession "You are the Christ!" I favor the latter. When people first had their eyes opened to the significance of Christ, that's when the church began. Many saw Jesus only as a carpenter, a rabbi, an itinerant preacher. But when people such as Peter began to see past his appearance to his meaning, that's when the Christian faith movement began.

And what is the meaning of Christ? The Bible and Christian tradition have stretched the limits of vocabulary in an effort to communicate it. A variety of terms are used: Messiah, Immanuel, The Word made Flesh, Son of God, Image of the Invisible, the new Adam, the Light of the World, the Incarnation, the Mediator, the King of Kings, the Pioneer and Perfecter of the Faith, etc. The list goes on.

I can't claim to have sorted out the complete ramifications of all these descriptive titles, but they point to something I know in my bones. What makes me a Christian is the inner "Ah ha" of my own soul that Jesus was/is a singular communication from the divine. Such an extraordinary occurrence deserves all the holy celebrations of Christmas.

December 16, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

June 18, 1982

Paul Tillich, in his book *My Search for Absolutes*, concludes that there is one moral absolute — love. Love is absolute in the sense that it is the one thing which is always required by God. It is the supreme Christian virtue (I Cor. 13). The intriguing thing is that love, as an ethical standard, is not only absolute, it is also relative. It can be related to every concrete situation. Its many expressions make it possible for love to fit like tailored clothes, in an infinite variety of situations.

One of the responsibilities of the Christian life is to walk into each situation, size it up with the eyes of love, and then parcel out just the right size, shape, color and kind of love which meets the need. There is no rule book which can tell us how to do this. Our religion is not a legalistic one with a codified prescription for every eventuality. It involves personal choice and sensitivity. There is a dimension of freedom and creativity in the Christian life. In fact, in some situations we may be called upon to become moral pioneers—those who break new ground in order to apply the principle of love to the unique demands of new situations. This is a part of what it means to work out our own salvation.

December 17, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 26, 1980

"Why do we give gifts at Christmas?" I posed that question to my family at the dinner table. The children stared at me with one of those looks: "Daddy's playing preacher again." The answer which finally came confirmed my understanding: "The Wise Men brought gifts, so we give gifts." I do not remember when I heard or read that explanation, but it is the one I grew up with.

There is, however, another and perhaps better answer: The gift of the Christ can be commemorated properly only by the reciprocity of giving. "We love because God first loved us" is the way the Bible puts it. It would not be far off base to translate that into: "We give because God's giving has captivated our lives, and when something meaningful is truly received (not simply taken) it fuels the motives for giving."

This spiritual dimension of Christmas is symbolized and celebrated through the exchange of gifts. It is also something which is not tied to our December festivities. For those of us operating out of the Christian framework, giving is not a seasonal affair. It is a style of living which should express itself in ways that go beyond the exchange of gifts on December 25.

December 18, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

May 1, 1981

"There is no such thing as a solitary Christian."

That's one of those quotes from John Wesley which has become a favorite among Methodists. The quote comes from his sermon on Matthew 5:13-16, "You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the world, etc." Wesley wraps three points around that text.

First, many maintained that the heights of faith were to be reached in a quiet and contemplative manner within the privacy of one's interior thoughts and meditations. There is nothing wrong with that, as Wesley himself maintained, unless it becomes a kind of monkish retreat from personal relationships and social involvements.

Second, many Christian virtues, which are urged upon us by Jesus and others have meaning only in the context of personal relationships. How can the hermit show neighborly love when he has cut himself off from others? In this respect "Christianity is essentially a social religion, and to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it."

Thirdly, a hidden faith is a contradiction in terms. If you've got it, it will show. As Wesley said, "As long as true religion abides in our hearts, it is impossible to conceal it. A secret, unobserved religion cannot be the religion of Jesus Christ."

December 19, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Feb. 13, 1982

It fell my turn to teach confirmation this past Sunday. The students probably thought I was a bit wacky in my method. We started in the Epworth parsonage. The floor plan of that historic home was laid out with masking tape on the carpet. As we sat in the kitchen, we talked about how Susanna Wesley conducted her own school for her own family. The Georgia-bound schooner was a makeshift configuration of tape and chairs.

The group moved to another area of the youth center to attend the prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street, London. It was here, while the leader was reading Martin Luther's *Preface to the Book of Romans*, that Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed." I even read a portion of Luther's article to the group.

Have you ever read it? From a preacher's standpoint its place in Wesley's life is most encouraging. Talk about dull! If I read it to you some Sunday morning you would be asleep in ten minutes. It is a lengthy, ponderous and somewhat tedious dissertation.

What then is so encouraging about it? I've always figured that if the Lord could use something so dull to convert Wesley, the Lord can use sermons a lot less knowledgeable than Luther's *Preface* to touch people.

December 20, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 18, 1992

I have been so unusually blessed with good health that I had almost forgotten what it is to be sick, but when the flu hit me with unrelenting vengeance last week, I received a rude reminder. I cannot recall being knocked so low since childhood. It is humbling to be sick.

I will never believe, as some have, that sickness is one of God's instruments of punishment. I just don't think God operates that way. However, I very much understand why people of religious sensitivities, such as the Psalmists, have spent so much time trying to fathom the spiritual meanings of disease, discomfort and disquietude. When physically and, therefore, emotionally down, it is impossible to avoid a lot of introspection. Sickness is a lonely experience even when blessed with the best of solicitous care and love from another. And when, to begin with, the solitude of interior thoughts has been the primary locale of one's ongoing dialogue with God, the self-isolation of sickness inevitably becomes haunted with religious groupings.

I cannot believe that God decided to send sickness in order to, as a friend of mine once said, "get my attention." But I can say, "He DID get my attention." I felt taken down a notch or two, and the message seemed to be: "Remember your vulnerability, your common humanity. Rise up from your bed to live with less pride, more gratitude, AND a healthier dose of compassion."

December 21, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

July 8, 1988

There is a place for reasoned belief, of course. Faith without clarity of thought can become distorted subjectivism. However, theology is and should be but the fruit of something which is more indigenous to the heart than to the mind. I was reminded of this by a recent conversation.

We were sharing spiritual experiences. My interlocutor described a situation of crisis, a night-long vigil with her soul, and a sense of "letting go and letting God." It was the experience I describe as "grace at point zero," and it is not uncommon among religious folk.

People can get so beat down that they finally have no alternative but to turn to God, and in the moment of radical surrender they let go of self-reliance and, as the well-known phrase puts it, they "let God." It is in that moment (point zero) that God's help (grace) is found, and it is in such circumstances that God ceases to be an abstract belief and becomes a source of personal companionship.

The acute sense of needing a higher help, and the feeling of finding it, is something which goes beyond theology. In fact, there is little doctrinal theology contained in such experiences. It is a reminder that the rock-bottom basis of dynamic faith is not informed belief, but personal surrender.

December 22, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 14, 1990

Sweaters & Sing-a-long, 11am
Blue Christmas, 1:30pm

The joy of Christmas can be a haunting mockery to those who have lost loved ones in the recent past. The family emphasis of the holidays serves only to underscore the vacancy in their own circle.

I truly wish I could give to these families a special present which would melt the tears of sadness. But, knowing that grief is sacred and, therefore, not to be rudely hustled from the scene or casually covered up with artificial cheer, I can only send to you the comment: "I'm thinking about you. May you,

above all others, be blessed by the true meaning of Christmas which most miss in all the superficialities—that God is love, that this love came down at Christmas in Jesus, and this love surrounds you on earth and your loved ones in eternity.

December 23, 2024

Christmas Eve Eve,
6pm in Fenn Hall

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 22, 1989

Perfect! Christmas Eve is on a Sunday this year. I wish it were always that way.

Across the years we have shifted a few national observances to Mondays. I wish we could do that with Christmas. It would put Christmas Eve on a Sunday, and that, in turn, would strengthen the religious aspect of our celebration. People sincerely want to be religious at Christmas, but it is difficult to achieve because of the pressure of preparation.

Even Christmas day itself tends to be so crowded that there is not much room for spirituality. Christmas Eve, however, is different. There is a lull in the activities, a kind of relaxed pause. People are in a mellow and even a holy mood. When they bring that to church with them it creates a religious atmosphere of unusual spiritual power. I sense it every year at our Christmas Eve communion.

I'm not advocating a change. Observing Christmas on December 25 is too hallowed by tradition to alter. I'm just rejoicing in the fortuitous conditions of the calendar, and expressing some happy anticipation as we approach December 24. We will have three services—the two morning worship services, and communion at 7:00 p.m. I hope you will come and enjoy the spiritual feeling of the season.

December 24, 2024

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 24, 1993

Christmas Eve, Sanctuary
4pm Family,
7pm & 11pm Candlelight

The conclusion of the Christmas story in Luke is: "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God ...

Just think of it! After a gigantic spiritual high at the manger they returned to the bleak tedium of sheep tending. But notice that they took with them the afterglow of their experience—"They returned, glorifying and praising God ... "

That's the challenge for us—to take some of that special Christmas spirit back into the ordinary routines which are waiting out there in the valleys of the post—Christmas blahs.

It's tough. It's like going from a sacred high to a secular low. However, there is assistance. It is called "worship." Part of our objective every Sunday is to help you keep the fires of the spirit glowing.

See you in church!

December 25, 2024

Christmas Day

Phil Fenn Reflection

Dec. 25, 1987

Have a great Christmas! Enjoy it to the limit!

I hope you are feeling just a pinch of the excitement that has infected our home. The kids will be here (Deb already is). I intend to put them in a chair and just stare at them for the first day, and then on the second I will begin talking to them. I have reached that age and stage when just the presence of some people is all the “Christmas” I want. Please know, however, that all my thoughts and feelings will not be completely absorbed in the fulfilling pleasures of my own experience. Some of you will be in my mind in a special way because of the loneliness which Christmas tends to accentuate. Although the boisterous joy which invades many households may not knock on your door, my prayer is that your Christmas will nonetheless know the benediction of its true meaning—shalom, i.e., personal peace and spiritual fulfillment.



Come or connect for worship with us in multiple regular and special Sunday services and events this season. For details, visit our website at mcfarlinumc.org or call us at (405) 321-3484.

