

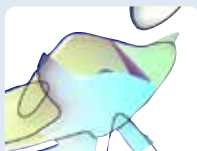
2 Scott's op-ed



3 Advent calendar



4 Dying words



5 Same-sex ceremonies?



6 Two openings



7 Echoes



The VOICE

December 2011

▲ Inside The VOICE



by Tim Palmer

Good News for the 100%

It's Advent, and I'm thinking about Wall Street.

Last year, senior pastor Scott Black Johnston submitted an essay about Christmas Eve that was published in *The Wall Street Journal* (and is reprinted on page 2 of this issue).

This year, a guest in our shelter is active in Occupy Wall Street, the movement that started in lower Manhattan and has inspired similar protests in cities around the world. A few weeks ago he shared some copies of the *Occupy Wall Street Journal* with me.

It's a quirky coincidence, how Wall Street and Occupy Wall Street are, in a sense, sharing space here. I mentioned this to Scott, who started riffing on the Nativity narrative in the vernacular of 21st century politics. "The Magi were 1 percenters," he said. "The shepherds, obviously, were in the 99 percent, probably about as far down as you could go."

Yet our Christmas story doesn't put them at odds. Angels with good news to tell, arguably the best news the world will ever hear, choose a random group of shepherds as their audience. The word

spreads, and within a few days kings—kings!—are kneeling in barnyard filth, offering gifts to a peasant child.

The God revealed in Scripture seems not to see, or not to regard, the difference between 1 percent and 99 percent, shepherds and kings. The Church, at its best, tries to do the same. It doesn't mean we don't disagree, or work toward different ideas of justice. But on Christmas Eve, we are somehow able to come together under one roof, and celebrate a promise and a hope that's offered to all of us.

As Scott put it a year ago, we come on Christmas Eve wondering "if angels are going to show up and proclaim, once again, that there is a God who loves us and that heaven's great desire for us is peace."

Let's see.

.....
Tim Palmer is director of communications.

'SOMETHING GREAT, CRUCIAL & MOMENTOUS'

by Scott Black Johnston

On Christmas Eve, the church will be full.

Some will come out of habit—harboring nostalgia for this night. Some will act out of courtesy: “Yes, Grandma, I’ll go with you.” Some will be here because they enjoy the once-a-year music.

But these reasons alone do not explain why the pews will be full.

In recent years, preachers have become anxious cats. We worry over the increasing number of young people who, when surveyed about their beliefs, check “no faith whatsoever.” We tell stories about churches that have closed their doors—developers turning sanctuaries into boutiques. We wonder if we are becoming “like Europe.”

“Religion” derives from the Latin *religare*, to bind, but in New York City it seems to have lost its binding power. Almost 60% of the New Yorkers who live within three miles of our midtown church claim that they have no involvement in any faith. That’s easily the highest percentage of people in any region in the country.

Yet on Christmas Eve, people will come.

Many will feel awkward. They will be unfamiliar with the motions—the standing, the sitting, the praying, the singing. Some will repress giggles. Others will dab at tears. A few will be tipsy. Some will walk out before it is over. Most will be eager to hold a candle. Nearly everyone will sing “Silent Night.”

I used to resent the awkwardness of the night, the barnyard quality of it. It’s a peculiar crowd and a disorderly service.

This may explain why some clergy choose this moment to chastise people for not being there the other 51 weeks of the year. I know a minister who used to remark, with a pained smile, that

there were folks in attendance who think that the only flowers ever displayed in church are poinsettias.

Instead of wagging our fingers, what we really should do is marvel—at the fact that, in spite of our scandals, our hypocrisy and our ineptitude, people will still darken our doors on Christmas Eve.

Karl Barth, the early 20th-century Swiss theologian who spent a dozen years as a pastor, said that the institution of the Church is grounded in a claim that seems to stand in grotesque contradiction to the facts. Still, whenever people arrived at his small church on Sunday mornings, Barth sensed an air of expectancy.

In a 1922 speech to a gathering of ministers in Schulpforta, Germany, Barth described people who come to worship as perpetual questioners who nonetheless anticipate that “something great, crucial, and even momentous is about to happen.”

This is the core of religion, the thing that binds us together, the thing we haven’t yet managed to quash—the expectation that something momentous is going to happen when we gather.

That’s why people, even the tipsy ones, will turn out on Christmas Eve. They will come to see if angels are going to show up and proclaim, once again, that there is a God who loves us and that heaven’s great desire for us is peace.

They will come, not simply out of nostalgia or courtesy or routine, but, as Barth put it, to find out and thoroughly understand the answer to one question: “Is it true?”

Senior Pastor Scott Black Johnston’s essay was originally published in The Wall Street Journal on Dec. 23, 2010. Reprinted with permission.



The Motet Choir of the University of Chicago brings its East Coast holiday tour to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church on Friday, Dec. 16, at 7 pm in Kirkland Chapel. The Motet Choir will be joined by the *Collegium Musicum* of Columbia University.

2011 ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS CALENDAR

Sunday, December 4

Second Sunday of Advent - Holy Communion.

"O That Warning Cry Obey!" - Isaiah 40:1-11
The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, preaching.
9:30 am, Kirkland Chapel; 11 am, Sanctuary.

Christmas Angel Tree Project.

Providing gifts for the children of incarcerated parents.
In the narthex and W. 55th St. entrance.

Behind the Music:

Exploring Advent Hymns and Christmas Carols.

First of a two-part Adult Education class by Mitchell Crawford, interim director of music ministries.
12:30 pm, Boardroom.

Cider Sing! Hosted by the Hospitality Committee.

12:30 pm, Fifth Avenue steps.

Tuesday, December 6

Hanging of the Greens. 6:30 pm, Sanctuary.

Thursday, December 8

Blue Christmas.

The Rev. Kate Dunn & Linda Jiménez, M.Div., presiding.
7 pm, Kirkland Chapel.

Friday, December 9

NEXT Christmas Party. 9 pm, Butterfield 8, 5 E. 38th St.

Saturday, December 10

Tour of FAPC. Free guided tour, sponsored by the Membership Committee. 11:30 am, Narthex.

Women's Association Gala Christmas Tea.

3:30 pm, Bonnell Hall.

Sunday, December 11

Third Sunday of Advent.

"Most Highly Favored Lady" - Luke 1:26-38
The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, preaching.
9:30 am, Kirkland Chapel; 11 am, Sanctuary.

Behind the Music:

Exploring Advent Hymns and Christmas Carols.

The Adult Education class by Mitchell Crawford concludes with a festive sing-along.
12:30 pm, Kirkland Chapel.

Cider Sing! Hosted by Family Ministries.

12:30 pm, Fifth Avenue steps.

Christmas Party for the Homeless. 2 pm, Bonnell Hall.

Bowery Mission Service of Lessons and Carols.

6 pm, 227 Bowery between Prince and Rivington Streets.

Monday, December 12

Christmas Party for Shelter Families.

6 pm, Christian Education Center.

Friday, December 16

An Evening of Holiday Music. The Motet Choir of the University of Chicago with Columbia University's *Collegium Musicum*. 7 pm, Kirkland Chapel.

Saturday, December 17

Tour of FAPC. Free guided tour, sponsored by the Membership Committee. 11:30 am, Narthex.

Family Ministries Christmas Party.

Noon, Christian Education Center.

Sunday, December 18

Fourth Sunday of Advent - Christmas Joy Offering.

"No Crying He Makes?" - John 1:14-18
The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, preaching.
9:30 and 11 am, Sanctuary.

Christmas Pageant: 'Twas the Year Before Christmas.

The Children's Choir and Youth, directed by Dr. Eugenia Oi Yan Yau. During the 9:30 and 11 am worship services, Sanctuary.

Cider Sing! Hosted by NEXT Ministries.

12:30 pm, Fifth Avenue steps.

Saturday, December 24

Meals on Heels Christmas Eve Feast.

Volunteers meet at 9 am in Bonnell Hall to prepare a Christmas meal for homebound seniors. Deliveries begin at 11:30 am.

Christmas Eve Services

"The Hopes and Fears of All the Years" - Luke 2:1-14

Family Ministries Service

The Rev. Charlene Han Powell and Linda Jiménez, M.Div., preaching.
Music, 3:30 pm; Worship, 4 pm, Sanctuary.

Early Evening Service

The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, preaching.
Music, 7 pm; Worship, 7:30 pm, Sanctuary.

Late Service

The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, preaching.
Music, 10:30 pm; Worship, 11 pm, Sanctuary.

Sunday, December 25

Christmas Day Service of Lessons and Carols.

"And Heaven and Nature Sing"
The Rev. Randy Weber, presiding. 11 am, Sanctuary.

Saturday, December 31

Meals on Heels New Year's Eve Feast.

Volunteers meet at 9 am in Bonnell Hall to prepare a holiday meal for homebound seniors. Deliveries begin at 11:30 am.

Sunday, January 1

First Sunday after Christmas.

"Go, Tell It!" - Isaiah 61:1-3, 8; Luke 4:16-21
Linda Jiménez, M.Div., preaching. 11 am, Sanctuary.

A CHRISTIAN CONVERSATION ABOUT DEATH

It may not sound like a fun Christmas gift, a book about death by a poet/undertaker. Still, senior pastor Scott Black Johnston hopes you'll pick up a copy of Thomas Lynch's *The Undertaking* this month because, come January, that's our curriculum.

"Thinking about death is something we ought to do as a Christian community," he says. "It's part of the Christian narrative—birth, death and resurrection. That's not just Jesus' story, it's our story, too—even if it is the part we least like to talk about."

The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade was a finalist for the National Book Award when it appeared in 1997. It's the book Lynch promised his father he would write someday, all about how their family business has ministered to the living and the dead in their small Michigan town for three generations.

Growing up amidst the collaboration of mortuaries and morgues, churches and graveyards, Lynch writes that "I had come to know that the undertaking that my father did had less to do with what was done to the dead and more with what the living did about the fact of life that people died."

Lynch's book is a collection of surprises. One chapter tells heart-breaking stories of loss and grief. Another explores a business plan for a combination cemetery and golf course. Another culminates in one of the most beautiful poems about a small-town cemetery you will ever read. In another, Lynch is almost shocking in his virulent response to assisted suicide and the commercialization of death.

The book is, by turns, funny and frightening, comforting and discomfiting.

"Lynch writes about death in a way that is unusual, deep and sometimes irreverent," Dr. Black Johnston says. "Some parts were disturbing, even as they peeled the scales from my eyes."



Dr. Thomas Long

The Undertaking is a very different book from the one we read as a congregation last fall, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. Yet both fit the profile the senior pastor looks for when he invites us all to focus on a common text: books with theological content "that help us think, in spiritual and religious ways, about the practicalities of life."

As he did with the Gilead Project in 2010, Dr. Black Johnston will convene small groups to read *The Undertaking* in January.

The project will culminate not with a visit from the author this time, but in a conversation with a theologian. Dr. Thomas Long, professor of preaching at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, will engage the theological questions raised in Lynch's book during an Adult Education program on Sunday, Feb. 12.

Long argues that Christian funerals have become overly sanitized, spiritually thin and divorced from theology and tradition.

"Memorial services"—where the dead are remembered, but not present—are overtaking traditional funerals. These services increasingly emphasize joy and celebrating the life of the one departed, as if to ignore the somber reality of death and its place in Christian belief and practice.

The early Christian funeral "was deemed to be the last phase of a lifelong journey toward God, and the faithful carried the deceased along... with singing and a mixture of grief and joyful hope," Long writes in his book, *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (2009). "The pattern for funerals now appearing is not simply a modernization and adaptation of traditional customs but a radical, and finally diminished, replacement of Christian ritual."

All are invited to be part of the dialogue between Thomas Lynch and Thomas Long. Watch for more details about small-group discussions of *The Undertaking* in January. Copies of both Lynch's and Long's books are available in The Shop. An excerpt from *The Undertaking* appears on the next page.

Laura Fissinger, *The Rising and the Remembered*, 2011. Fissinger, a member of FAPC, is a freelance writer and illustrator.

Just a Shell

There's this "just a shell" theory of how we ought to relate to dead bodies. You hear a lot of it from young clergy, old family friends, well-intentioned in-laws—folks who are unsettled by the fresh grief of others. You hear it when you bring a mother and a father in for the first sight of their dead daughter, killed in a car wreck or left out to rot by some mannish violence. It is proffered as comfort in the teeth of what is a comfortless situation, consolation to the inconsolable. Right between the inhale and the exhale of the boneracking sob such hurts produce, some frightened and well-meaning ignoramus is bound to give out with, "It's OK, that's not her, it's just a shell." I once saw an Episcopal deacon nearly decked by the swift slap of the

mother of a teenager, dead of leukemia, to whom he'd tendered his counsel. "I'll tell you when it's 'just a shell,'" the woman said. "For now and until I tell you otherwise, she's my daughter." She was asserting the longstanding right of the living to declare the dead dead. Just as we declare the living living through baptisms, lovers in love by nuptials, funerals are the way we close the gap between the death that happens and the death that matters. It's how we assign meaning to our little remarkable histories.

—from Thomas Lynch,
The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade (1997).
Excerpted with permission.

The Marriage Task Force

This past summer, the legalization of civil marriage for same-sex couples in New York put every church in the state on the spot.

The marriage law, signed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo in June, allows religious institutions to decide for themselves which couples they will marry, a right of refusal that churches and clergy have always had. Some churches are bound by denominational policy not to perform marriages for same-sex couples. Others started performing same-sex weddings the day the law went into effect on July 17.

What about Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church? Senior pastor Scott Black Johnston announced to the Session this fall his intent to form a task force to recommend a policy on same-sex marriage. The task force will begin its work early in 2012, with a proposal coming forward perhaps as early as the spring.

"Although we have had only one or two inquiries so far, we can expect them to increase," he says. "This is both a theological and an ecclesiological issue, and we need to discern together, in community, the path that we will follow."

The Presbyterian Church (USA) officially defines marriage as the union of one man and one woman. But at its last General Assembly in 2010, the denomination urged local presbyteries to study two competing reports from the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Unions and Christian Marriage, which was formed in 2008.

Marriage equality is expected to be front and center again at the General Assembly in Pittsburgh next summer. A number of presbyteries—particularly from states* where same-sex marriage is legal—will be pressing for changes in the Book of Order to allow pastoral discretion in the blessing of same-sex civil marriages and the use of church facilities for such ceremonies.



The Rev. Mieke Vandersall, executive director, Presbyterian Welcome

"Clergy and congregations around the country, including some here in New York City, are moving forward, with or without the blessing of the PCUSA," says the Rev. Mieke Vandersall, executive director of Presbyterian Welcome, which advocates for the full inclusion of LGBT persons in the Presbyterian Church (FAPC is a member church). "We are working with a number of sessions that, like Fifth Avenue, are weighing the conscience and pastoral needs of their congregations against the current polity of the denomination."

Dr. Black Johnston expects the task force to gather input from the congregation and study PCUSA polity in preparing its proposal for the Session. Individuals interested in serving on the task force are invited to contact him at fapc@fapc.org.

* Same-sex marriage is legal in Connecticut, Iowa, New Hampshire, New York, Massachusetts and Vermont, as well as in the District of Columbia.

SHAPING THE FUTURE OF MUSIC & OUTREACH

The search is on for staff who will help to lead two ministries that Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church is particularly noted for—music and outreach.

Beginning this month, a committee led by FAPC member Robert Jezowski will conduct a national search for a director of music ministries, the position that Mitchell Crawford has held on an interim basis since January 2009.

“We will start by having conversations, with members of the choir and members of the congregation, about their hopes and dreams for the future of the music ministry at FAPC,” Jezowski says. “We want to create a position description that genuinely reflects who we have in mind for this important job.”

While Crawford is eligible to apply for the position, he has also submitted applications to graduate schools across the country, a process he began over the summer.

“When I consider the years I’ve spent as interim music director, I do so with great thankfulness for what has been a singularly unique opportunity: to not only grow as a church musician and administrator, but to literally grow a program as well,” Crawford



Robert Jezowski will lead the search for FAPC’s director of music ministries.

Director of Music Ministries Search Committee

| | |
|-------------------------------|--------------|
| Robert Jezowski, <i>chair</i> | Sean O’Neill |
| Joy Canfield | Tamra Paselk |
| Nancy Moore | |

says. “I was excited to learn in early September that I would have the opportunity to apply for the position of music director, and I’m looking forward to reviewing the required duties, desired attributes and personal qualifications the committee sets forth as I attempt to discern God’s plan for me.”

Senior pastor Scott Black Johnston credits Crawford with bringing creativity, innovation and much-needed stability to the FAPC music program over the last three years. “Under Mitchell’s leadership, the music program has not only started growing again, it has regained its stature and the reputation for excellence that are its heritage,” he says. “Mitchell and all the members of the music program deserve a lot of credit for this achievement.”

Jezowski expects to begin advertising for the position soon after Christmas and start interviews in March, with a goal of making a hire by the summer.

This month FAPC also began looking for an interim director of outreach ministries, who will report to the Rev. Kate Dunn, associate pastor for pastoral care and outreach. An opening was created on the staff with the retirement of Emily Dunlap, FAPC’s social worker, in October. The new position will be a hybrid, intended to help fill the need for staff support in both outreach and pastoral care.

“When Emily announced her retirement, Scott asked me to consider the best way to cover the two main areas of my ministry,” Rev. Dunn says. “I realized I wanted an opportunity to be more hands-on with pastoral care. So I am taking on part of Emily’s responsibilities. This will allow the individual we hire to provide a level of support to outreach that we have lacked for several years.”

The new interim director will supervise the day-to-day operations and staff of FAPC’s homeless ministries, serve as staff liaison to congregational outreach groups and committees, and work with other leaders in the church to develop and promote our outreach ministries.

At the same time, the interim director will support Rev. Dunn in assisting members in need (with regard to housing, finances or health care, for example). This was an important role that Dunlap played, helping clients negotiate the labyrinth of city, state and federal social services agencies to get the assistance they needed.

ECHOES

Updates of articles from the November issue of *The VOICE*

Randy’s Big Surprise ▶

Last month marked the 20th anniversary of the Rev. Randy Weber’s ministry at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. On Nov. 6, the congregation surprised our long-serving associate pastor with a party in Bonnell Hall, a round of toasts and tributes, and a passel of gifts, including a personalized jersey from his beloved Philadelphia Eagles. Easily the biggest surprise was senior pastor Scott Black Johnston’s announcement that—thanks to a special favor, a few phone calls and a gracious Eagles organization—Randy would be the guest chaplain for the Philadelphia Eagles when the team prepares to meet the New York Jets on Sunday, Dec. 18. After leading the team in prayer, Randy and his wife Cindy will have tickets to the afternoon game. “Wow—my friends and family still can’t get over this gift!” he says. “I love being part of the team at FAPC, and hope that God grants me the ability to continue serving with you for many more years to come. Thank you, thank you, thank you!”



The Rev. Weber, football chaplain

◀ Rita’s New Record

In October Rita Arlen, president of the Women’s Association for the past 14 years, was among the four winners of the inaugural Kenneth O. Jones Distinguished Service Awards. A month later, she added another laurel to her resume when the association’s annual Joy of Christmas Bazaar netted more than \$30,000—a record high. The entire proceeds go directly into the Women’s Association benevolence program—and 60% of those grants support FAPC’s own ministries and programs, including Meals on Heels, Operation Campfire (children’s summer camp) and Deacons Service Committee projects. “We are grateful to the staff and volunteers who helped to set up and organize one of the most successful bazaars we’ve ever had,” Arlen says. “And thank you to all who donated items for the sale. Your generosity made a huge difference.”



Rita Arlen

Preparing for the Bazaar

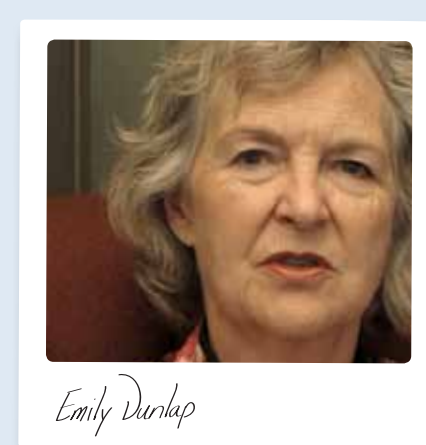
The Bazaar on opening day

Nominations, Please!

Just after the holidays (on Jan. 8, to be specific), the Nominating Committee will officially invite FAPC members to nominate officers for the Session, Board of Deacons and Board of Trustees, and to serve as members-at-large on the Nominating Committee itself. Nomination forms will be mailed and made available online at fapc.org. If you are interested in serving as an officer—or you have another qualified candidate in mind—get your recommendations ready. The deadline for nominations is Jan. 31, with a slate of candidates presented for election during the congregation’s annual meeting on April 25. For more information, contact Emi Iwaida, chair of the Nominating Committee, at nominations@fapc.org.

Emily’s Fond Farewell ▼

On Oct. 30, church social worker Emily Dunlap retired from the staff after 29 years of service. The congregation will celebrate Emily with a special event on Sunday, Jan. 29, following the 11 am worship service. Mark your calendars now, and watch for more details.



Emily Dunlap



Worship



Fellowship



Learning



Family Ministries



Outreach

▲Check out our video series

Broadway Bound!

The Theatre Fellowship of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church has announced plans for its first Off Broadway Showcase production in three years.

Broadway Bound, by American playwright Neil Simon, will open on Jan. 27 in Jones Auditorium and continue into the first week of February. This 1986 stage hit is the final play in Simon's autobiographical trilogy about his youth, preceded by *Brighton Beach Memoirs* in 1983 and *Biloxi Blues* in 1985.

Broadway Bound is set in 1949 at the Jerome family home in the working-class neighborhood known as Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. Brothers Eugene and Stanley have begun writing comedy sketches for the Catskills resorts, hoping this will be the first step on the road to fame and fortune. Simon dedicated the play to his mother, father and brother.

The Theatre Fellowship will hold auditions at the church on Saturday, Dec. 17, with callbacks before Christmas. For more information, contact Janice Hass (JCHass819@gmail.com). If you are interested in helping out with the production, or volunteering in other ways, contact Theatre Fellowship chair Linda Ferm (fermink@nyc.rr.com).

"*Broadway Bound* is a poignant drama, etched with comedic moments," Ferm says. "We look forward to seeing you all at the show. It will be the perfect cure for the dark and cold month of January."

DECEMBER

See page 3 for a list of Advent and Christmas events.

December

- 4 **Women's Association Last-Minute Sale.** 10 am, Bonnell Hall.
- 5 **Mom's Bible Study.** Sponsored by Family Ministries, this study group meets at 9:30 am on the first Monday of the month. For information, contact Mollie Duggal (mollieduggal@yahoo.com).
- 6 **Employment Advisory.** 6:30 pm, Corning Logan Room.
- 10 **Tour of FAPC.** 11:30 am, Narthex. Free guided tour of the Sanctuary, Kirkland Chapel and the Gallery. Sponsored by the Membership Committee.
- 14 **Eccentric Existence.** A discussion group on faith, prayer and discipleship, led by senior pastor Scott Black Johnston. 7:07 am, Romeyn Room.
- 17 **Auditions for Broadway Bound.** 11 am, Jones Auditorium. The Theatre Fellowship brings Neil Simon's award-winning play to FAPC in January.
- Tour of FAPC.** 11:30 am, Narthex. The weekly tours conclude today. They will resume during the Easter season.
- 20 **Employment Advisory.** 6:30 pm, Corning Logan Room.
- 26-27 **Christmas Holidays.** Building closed.

January

- 2 **New Year's Day Holiday.** Building closed.
- 15 **The Bridge Art Program.** A new exhibition of works by clients of The Bridge, a social services agency serving the homeless and people living with mental illness, HIV/AIDS and substance abuse disorders. Sponsored by the Arts and Our Faith Committee. The Gallery.
- 16 **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.** Building closed.
- 17 **Employment Advisory.** 6:30 pm, Corning Logan Room.
- 21 **Family Ministries Sing-Along & Parents Night Out.** 3:30 pm, Christian Education Center.
- 22 **Bowery Mission.** 5:45 pm, 227 Bowery, between Prince and Rivington Streets on the Lower East Side. FAPC volunteers have led worship and served dinner once a month at this historic shelter for more than 40 years.
- 27-28 **Women's Winter Sabbath.** House of the Redeemer, 7 E. 95th St. Led by the Rev. Kate Dunn.