

the Messenger

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November/December 2025



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15,000 Meals Packed

FOR HUNGER FIGHT





Left: RPC held a Blessing of the Animals on Monday, September 29. Many people brought their dogs, as well as photos of other pets!

Top Right: On World Communion Sunday, October 5, RPC held its first (at least in recent memory) World Communion Sunday Food Festival. There were opportunities to fill a plate with food from Philippines, Turkiye, South Africa, Guatemala, El Salvador, the Netherlands, Scotland, USA, Hungary, and Germany, as well as a table with spaghetti and tacos.

Bottom Right: RPC held a food drive in early November to help support those who were losing their SNAP benefits. We filled the church van TWICE with non-perishable food and also raised \$3,920.00. All proceeds were delivered to Trinity Food Pantry.



From Your Pastor

Brian Lays

Dear Riversiders:

As Thanksgiving approaches, I have been thinking about the past year and practicing gratitude for our Riverside community. Of course, for Christians, gratitude should be an ongoing practice, not merely a seasonal one. Still, Thanksgiving gives us the chance to be intentional about reflecting on the good things God is doing in our lives. Here are a few of my reflections this year.



First, the Be the Church initiative was a tremendous success. I often marveled at the diligence, clarity, and effort that the planning team put into planning and executing this church-wide visitation effort. So many people played a part in its success, and it was largely member-driven throughout. The feedback we gathered was largely constructive and hopeful, and the data we received informed the session's priorities with regard to staffing and budgeting. It was remarkable to see our members mobilize in such an all-inclusive way, and their efforts demonstrate the deep commitment that Riversiders hold for our faith community.

Second, our new Mary Lou Davis Family Life Center opened, and we have already begun to live into it in all sorts of ways. Pickleball, basketball, and yoga have become mainstays in the facility, and we have welcomed groups like AA and the Sanctuary on 8th Street onto the court. Our basketball league is currently playing on our own campus for the first time in the league's long history. The facility has also augmented other events we've hosted, from the Summer Sizzler to Shiver at the River. I can only imagine the ways in which we will leverage the facility in the coming year for continued ministry.

Finally, new staff have brought new opportunities and excitement. Jaimie Smith has rapidly expanded our regular programming for younger and older adults, and has overseen some of the best attended church-wide fellowship events in years, from the ice cream social to the World Communion Sunday food festival. Janet Novick has brought a wonderful warmth and presence to our rapidly growing children's ministry, and we continue to welcome new families to Riverside regularly. The gifts they have brought to us are quickly bearing fruit!

Of course, none of this matters if God is not glorified and faith is not nurtured. What I am most grateful for is not merely the level of engagement we are seeing as this year draws to a close, but the stories of transformation that emerge from that engagement. It is not uncommon to hear of the love, connection, and faith that our members find in the presence of one another. We are a church that laughs, cries, and sings together. We are a church that serves our neighbors and puts our hands and feet into action. And we are a church that strives to grow in faith and faithfulness. I am grateful to be a part of a community where everyone belongs.

Well, much more comes to mind, but I'll leave it at that. I wonder what comes to mind for you?

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Brian

Welcome to Janet Novick

Director of Children's Ministry

Janet Novick stepped into the role of our new Director of Children's Ministry at Riverside Presbyterian Church in October! Janet brings multiple years of experience pouring into young lives, and she is bursting with energy and a deep, genuine love for Jesus. When she's not creating meaningful faith experiences for our kids, you can find her giving back to the community by volunteering at Isaiah 117 House, or tending to her vibrant garden where she grows a variety of spicy peppers. She's a proud mom of three adult children and one spoiled dog. Get ready, RPC families—Janet is here to jump-start a fun, faithful, and truly dynamic new chapter for our Children's Ministry!



Advent Events and Services

Daily Advent Devotional

Booklet available in the office with the option to receive via email each week

The Weary World Rejoices, from Everything Happens with Kate Bowler.

Advent, Scripture, and the Visual Arts Sunday School Class

3-Week Class on November 30, December 7, and December 21, 9:30–10:15 am

Join us this Advent season for a three-week journey to the birth of Christ through scripture and the visual arts. We will reflect on the rich passages of Advent and deepen our understanding of their meaning by engaging with various images of paintings, sculpture and photography. Together, we will discover how scripture and visual images can open our hearts in new ways as we prepare for the coming of Christ. Taught by Claudia Calhoun.

Youth Group Christmas Party

Sunday, November 30, 5:00–7:00 pm

For all youth 6th–12th grade, friends welcome! Join us for a meal and some Christmas cheer! Hosted by the Swiercek family; address shared week of.

Ring the Bell for the Salvation Army

December 1–6 (Monday–Saturday), 10:00 am–7:00 pm

RPC volunteers are ringing the bell for the Salvation Army at Publix on Riverside Ave. Groups or individuals can sign up for a 1-hour shift here: www.bit.ly/decemberbell Questions? Call Arden Brugger at 904-362-1347.

Worship and Wonder

Sunday, December 7, 8:30 am

Theme: God is... A Gift!

Worship and Wonder follows a similar order of worship to traditional Sunday mornings, with increased opportunities for experiential learning, including relevant and engaging faith stations. Join us for muffins, coffee, and juice after the service (and prior to Sunday School) in Bittinger Hall. Nursery is also available.

Christmas Riversiders

Sunday, December 7, 6:00–8:00 pm

Join us for Christmas Riversiders at home of the Goff Family! (San Marco area)

Come enjoy one of RPC's most festive holiday traditions: an evening of food, fellowship, and caroling! Bring a dish and beverage to share as we celebrate the season together. Address will be shared one week prior to the event. Children's ministry staff will provide on-site childcare. If your children will be attending, please email emily.heeg@rpcjax.org.

Greening of the Sanctuary

Saturday, December 13, 12:00–3:00 pm

Join us for the Greening of the Sanctuary! We'll enjoy a festive afternoon as we decorate the Sanctuary with live greenery and sing our favorite Carols in preparation for Christmas! It's a wonderful way to start the season and share some Christmas cheer. Everyone is welcome — bring your friends and family! Holiday snacks and hot beverages provided. Come and go as you please.

Christmas Breakfast - Evite Coming Soon!

Sunday, December 14, 9:00–10:15 am

Join us for a festive Christmas Breakfast before Lessons & Carols! We'll gather in Kissling Hall to prepare our hearts, minds, and stomachs for a beautiful worship service. If you're willing to donate a breakfast casserole (sweet or savory) please contact Jaimie Smith at jaimie.smith@rpcjax.org or 904-591-5258.

Advent

A Service of Lessons and Carols

Sunday, December 14, one service only at 10:30 am

Join us for one of the most beloved services of the year, featuring the Riverside Choir accompanied by a string orchestra and the Riverside Handbells. Inspired by the world-famous Festival of Lessons and Carols at Kings College Cambridge, the service will feature anthems and our favorite carols interspersed with the Biblical narrative of the anticipation and birth of Jesus Christ. You won't want to miss this musical highlight of the season! Be with us in the sanctuary or online at www.rpcjax.org/live. Please note, there is no 8:30 am worship service on December 14.

Caring Tree - Bring Gifts Back to RPC and Gift Sorting

Bring Gifts back by Sunday, December 14, at 11:30 am

Purchase a Christmas gift for a local child (with guidance from the gift tags on the Caring Tree). Bring wrapped gifts to RPC by Sunday, December 14 at 11:30 am. After the 10:30 service, if you can stay for 30 minutes, we could use your help sorting gifts. Questions? Please contact Jo Pratt-Dannals at jo.prattdannals@gmail.com or 904-707-5625. Choose a gift online: www.bit.ly/caringtree2025

Blue Christmas/ The Longest Night at Riverside Park Methodist Church

Wednesday, December 17, 6:30–7:30 pm

819 Park St, Jacksonville, FL 32204

RPC and RPUMC will be co-hosting this service of healing and wholeness for those navigating a season of grief

Gingerbread Extravaganza Experience (and cookie decorating) for all ages! Evite Coming Soon!

Saturday, December 20, 11:00 am–2:00 pm

Meet at 11:00 am at The Jacksonville History Center, 318 Palmetto Street

Join us for a joyful, intergenerational holiday outing to the 23rd Annual Gingerbread Extravaganza Experience. We'll enjoy the exhibit together (must purchase a ticket), and afterward, we'll head to the church for light refreshments and gingerbread cookie decorating (no cost). Ticket prices: Adult \$12, youth \$5, Seniors \$7. Children under 3, Military, and First Responders are free. Help us get a head count for cookie decorating by RSVP'ing on the Evite or by contacting jaimie.smith@rpcjax.org or call 904-591-5258.

Friends in Five Points - Luminaria Setup

Sunday, December 21, 11:45 am in Bittinger Hall

In December, the Neighboring Collaborative is offering something a little different on the third Sunday. December 21 is the annual RAP Luminaria Night. Again this year we will light up the church grounds with luminaria bags and candles. After church, enjoy lunch at the Five Points restaurant of your choice OR have lunch in Bittinger Hall and help assemble luminaria bags to light up the church for the annual RAP Luminaria Night. Lunch will be provided from a Five Points restaurant for our team of volunteers. If you'd like to have lunch in Bittinger Hall and help assemble luminaria bags, please sign up so we have an accurate head count for lunch. www.bit.ly/rpcluminaria2025

Christmas Eve Services

Wednesday, December 24

Services at 4:00, 7:00, and 11:00 pm. Holy Communion served at all services.

4:00 pm–Family Candlelight Service

Join us for this family-friendly service where all ages are invited to worship, participate with interactive elements from their pew, and celebrate the birth of Jesus. Children can come dressed as one of the characters from the Christmas story or can choose one of the costumes available in the narthex. Join us for this very fun and meaningful candlelight service. Nursery available.

7:00 pm–Festival Candlelight Service with Brass, Choir, and Extended Prelude

Join us for this festival candlelight service with brass and choir. An additional set of music will commence the service. The Rev. Dr. Brian Lays preaches. Be with us in the sanctuary or online at www.rpcjax.org/live. Nursery available.

11:00 pm–Contemplative Candlelight Service

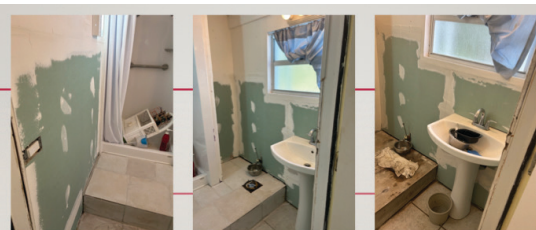
Join us for this 11:00 pm candlelight service featuring contemplative music and a harpist. The Rev. Dr. Brian Lays preaches.

Hurricane Home Repair Continues!

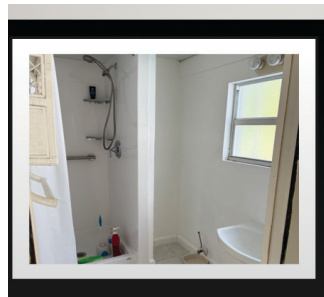
in Sarasota, Florida

On October 26th through December 30th, RPC members, Dave Tuttle and Kevin Davis, along with Jeff Claxton (from Eleven22) traveled to the 1st Presbyterian Church in Sarasota to work on a service project. The project was sourced from the United Way of Sarasota and for a family in Venice, Florida.

The 1st Presbyterian Church was a wonderful host providing a place to stay, lounge area and even some food upon their arrival. The service project scope was for a family that experienced significant flooding to their home from hurricanes, specifically in the garage and adjacent bedroom and bathroom. Some work has been performed from insurance claims but the area had drywall missing and cardboard covering insulation and other water damage to the floors. The team remodeled the bedroom with new drywall and baseboards and remodeled the bathroom with new tile and drywall. The team also repainted the garage floor. The family members consisting of a grandmother and grandson were very thankful for the work and were very pleased with the final results.



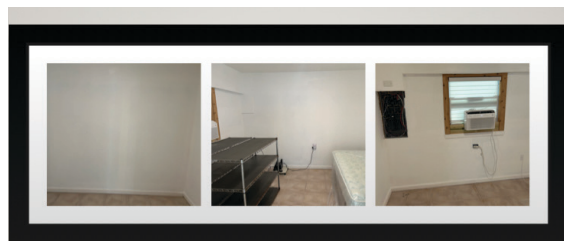
BATHROOM DURING REBUILD



BATHROOM
AFTER



BEDROOM
DURING
REBUILD



BEDROOM AFTER

Matthew 25 Lending Library

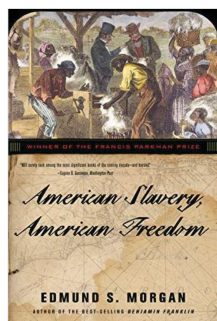
... focusing on matters of justice and equality



MATTHEW 25

RPC is a Matthew 25 (M25) congregation of the PC(USA). In Matthew 25, Jesus makes clear that what we do and how we treat others matters to God. Matthew 25 provides the foundation and framework for the missions of RPC. The three focus areas of the Matthew 25 initiative include: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating poverty. Responding with wisdom and discernment, we educate ourselves and work together to make our community more compassionate, more inclusive, and more just.

We have an amazing resource that informs and challenges us in our work: the Matthew 25 Lending Library. It is located in Bittinger Hall, inviting us all to sit, browse the collection, and check out a book! Our Lending Library was established because of the generous donation of Carl and Barbara Zacheis of a very comprehensive collection of books focusing on historical issues of race and inequality and our responses to racism today. Read one of Carl's reviews below.



American Slavery American Freedom The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia

by Edmund S. Morgan

Published in 1975, it is one of the earlier books in the collection. The author was a professor emeritus of American History at Yale University. He will provide an education on the strange marriage of freedom and education of Virginians. They drafted the Declaration of Independence but also the Constitution and the first ten amendments. The authors were all slaveholders. Virginia held 40% of all the slaves in America. This is a real education in history.

Check out a book from the Matthew 25 Lending Library today! If you'd like more information about the work of the Matthew 25 and the Community Outreach Committee, please contact dana.riley@rpcjax.org.

Youth Retreat at Montgomery

October 10–12, 2025

The Presbytery Youth Fall Retreat was full of connection, s'mores, worship, games, archery, rock wall climbing, face glitter, deep conversations, and so much fun! Together we explored this year's theme — Intertwined: The Tangle of Community — and discovered how God connects us in amazing ways. Thank you to Montgomery Center for a great retreat and to the Rev. Wilson Kennedy for leading us in keynote and worship!



A Way to Be a Good Neighbor

Purchase Caring Tree Gifts for Local Children by Jo Pratt-Dannals

In our neighborhood of Riverside there are many families struggling to make ends meet. One way I have found to be a “good neighbor” is to reach out to these families through the Caring Tree. November 9th marked the kickoff for 2025 Caring Tree at the Alternative Gift Fair. We are now in our 31st year and have matched over 7,000 children.

The process begins in September when I contact school representatives who know the needs of the families at Central Riverside, West Riverside and Ruth Upson Elementary Schools and at Presbyterian Social Ministries. They provide a list of students and gifts they have requested. This year we will provide two gifts each to 400 children in our neighborhood. Riverside Presbyterian Day School also joins our mission and provides gifts for over 100 refugees from Lutheran Social Services.

There are three ways to select a gift:

- Select ornaments from the tree in the sanctuary or the church office
- Select ornaments at: www.bit.ly/caringtree2025
- Select ornaments by calling Jo Pratt-Dannals at (904)707-5625.

This option allows you to take a family of 2-5 children from the same family.

Popular items include clothing, games, sports equipment and art supplies.

Follow the instructions on the back of the tag.



Caring Tree Sunday is December 14

Bring your wrapped gifts with the numbered tags to church by Sunday December 14th- Caring Tree Sunday.

After the 10:30 service, if you can stay for 30 minutes, we could use your help sorting gifts. After the sorting is completed, a smaller designated group of volunteers check, bag, and deliver the gifts to the schools. Parents of students pick up gifts at the school so it remains anonymous. In addition, each family receives a Publix gift card from our church.

Your generous support to Caring Tree over the years has touched me deeply. On December 14th, when you bring your gifts and place them at the front of the sanctuary, you will be part of an amazing direct ministry to children in our neighborhood. We give a simple gift to each child, but the message is much bigger. To each child you are saying, “You are part of the Christmas celebration. You are an important part of the family of God.” Should you have questions, please contact Jo Pratt-Dannals at (904)707-5625 or Dana Riley at (904)355-4585 x20.



Ring the Bell at Riverside Publix!

December 1-6, 10:00 am –7:00 pm; 1-hour shifts

For over 10 years, RPC members have rung the bell for the Salvation Army outside of the Publix in Riverside. Whether you sign up for a shift solo or with friends or family, know that our efforts help support those in need in Jacksonville. Please sign up online at www.bit.ly/bellringing2025, or by calling the Church office (904) 355-4585. Contact Arden Brugger (904)-362-1347 or arbroz1113@gmail.com if you have any questions!



Recently at Riverside



Shiver at the River



Art and Gift Market



Recently at Riverside



Riversiders - All Adult Potluck

The Newtons hosted Riversiders in September. This event is for all adults of the church to gather for food and fellowship. Join us for Christmas Riversiders at the home of the Goff Family on Sunday, December 7! (San Marco area) Come enjoy one of RPC's most festive holiday traditions: an evening of food, fellowship, and caroling! Bring a dish and beverage to share as we celebrate the season together. Childcare: Children's ministry staff will provide on-site childcare. If your children will be attending, please email Emily at emily.heeg@rpcjax.org.

Putting Faith Into Action

On Sunday, October 12, 2025, RPC members and friends packed 15,000 meals for Hunger Fight. This local organization supplies Title 1 schools with food over the weekend. This service opportunity was held on Stewardship Sunday as a way to put our faith into action! After packing meals, members brought their 2026 pledge card to worship. Thank you for your generous support! If you have not yet pledged, please consider doing so to help us reach our goal of 200 pledges totaling \$1,000,000.

www.onrealm.org/rpcjax/AddPledge/rpcgiving2026



December Birthdays

1
Ryan Johnson
Ron Roberts
Neil Schoenberger

2
Kate Adams
Anne Craig Charnley
Leigh Israel
Jessica Roberts
Emily Thomas

3
Jenna Dajani
Hylton Early
Sharon Meehan
Susan Schilling

4
Henry Stratton

5
Henry Coxe

6
Tyler Goff
Ford McKenzie
Mac Verlander

7
Nancy Howard
John Sapora
Brenda Trinder

8
Jane McCullagh
Matthew Stevenson
Margot Wrenn

9
Ian Cotchaleovitch

10
Ann Harrell
Jack Hazard

11
Courtland Rice

12
Elizabeth Mesrobian

13
Durham Branch
Russell Glasheen

14
Elaine Akin
Matt Stiefel

15
Patricia Helwig
Davis Johnson
Caroline Morgan

16
Kristin Taylor

17
Alex Fallucco
Caroline Harrell

18
Gracie Lambert

19
Pam Roberts
Rosemary Stout
Clay Tousey

20
Diane Schwalbe

21
Braxton Gillam
Marcie Kibili
Rebecca McNeil

23
Jamie Hoener
Susan Humes
Claire King

25
Tina Goedtke
Connie Overton
Max Yudain

26
Joel McEachin

27
Sammy Gilbert

28
Norma Farnell

Jenny Fox
Danny Weidlich

30
Luetta Graham
Elizabeth Meux

31
Lynda Andrews
Bonnie Drewes
Chase Schallen

January Birthdays

1
Vance Walker

2
Dan Blanks

3
Rob Rogers
Pat Setzer
Mildred Taylor

4
Emerson Coxe
Lola Hoff
Doris Thomas

5
Lauren Buberger
Hillary Riley
Julie Ryan

6
Allison Boyd
Bob Cook
Geoff Gartner
Julie Handley

7
Willa Graham

8
Wade Hampton
Lindsay Helms

11
Marshall Morgan
LeAnn Cruz
Scott Powell

12
Brenda Dohn
Joe Eberly

14
Jane Ellen Pollock
Paul Wrenn

15
Don Downing
Jan Downing
Michael Perry
Julie Wells

16
Jacob Campen
Thom Doonan
Chris Nuland

17
Candler Lott
Emily Parks
Jessica Stevenson

18
Phyllis Brinkley
Mattox Hair

19
Ellie Chambliss
Haiden Christian
Robert Elrod
Davis Meux
Olivia Meux

20
Joe Biederman
Lawton Green
Jacob Huber
Ron Littlepage
Andy McNeil
Jim Overton
Christine Rosenbloom

21
Patrick Andrews
Julie Baker
Lee Carswell
Mae Farnell
Margee Michaelis
Barbara Pence
Dave Pierson

22
Matson Coxe
Jason Evert
Michaela Fox
Will Proctor

23
Mary Campbell
Bill Schilling

24
Margaret Julian
Lissa Kiser

25
Ham Cooke
Jesse Huber
Grier Wells

26
Cory Meyers

27
Chris Creed

29
Adger Andrews
Marlene Goodwin
Percy Rosenbloom

30
Elizabeth Jolley
Paul Kramer

31
Lela Alexander
James Bryan
Madeline Kerr
Abby Scott
Robert Shipp

If we are missing your birthday,
please call the Church Office
(904) 355-4585 or
email communication@rpcjax.org



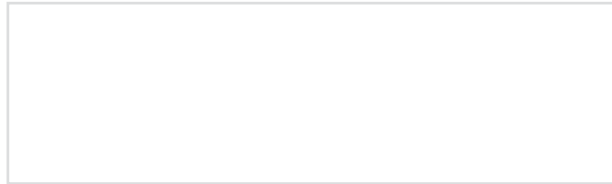
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Christmas Eve

at Riverside

All are welcome to join us for candlelight worship at 4:00, 7:00, or 11:00 pm
at Riverside Presbyterian Church in Historic 5 Points (849 Park St., 32204).

Wednesday, December 24

4:00 PM 7:00 PM 11:00 PM

4:00 pm–Family Candlelight Service*

7:00 pm–Festival Candlelight Service*
with Brass, Choir, and Extended Prelude

11:00 pm–Contemplative Candlelight Service
**Nursery available at 4:00 and 7:00 pm*



Celebrate the birth of Jesus

