

THE SPARK



January 2026

Embodying Love - Demanding Justice - Transforming the World





PASTOR'S REFLECTION

January 2026 Embodying Love - Demanding Justice - Transforming the World

Riviera Presbyterian Church
5275 Sunset Drive
Miami, FL 33143
(305) 666-8586

11:00am Sunday Worship Service
Office Hours M - R 9:30-6:30 pm
Sunday 9:00 - 1:00 pm

www.rivierachurch.org

Connect with us on social media
[@RivieraChurch](https://www.instagram.com/RivieraChurch)

All The People
Ministers

Dr. Walter Busse
Director of Music
rivierapresmusic@gmail.com

Emma Cottrell
Faith Formation & Outreach Director
rivierapresfaithformation@gmail.com

Barbara Prieto, CCA
Certified Church Administrator
rivierachurch@gmail.com

Clerk of Session
Kathy Stults

Session Members
Gerardo Avitia
Karen Collier
Laura Fothergill
Angela Galbreath
Amparo Hernandez
Michele Ready
Cris Sweeny

“Beloved Friends,
Right now, as I write this, it is the week before Christmas, 2025. As we’ve been preparing for the Longest Night worship service this week, and I’ve been considering what kind of message we need to hear at this moment in the season, my thoughts have returned to a book that I read several years ago by Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, Learning to Walk in the Dark.

Even in this part of the world, winter is a darker season than most. These recent months in our church and in the world have also come with their own share of darkness and uncertainty. The feeling that we are stumbling forward without much light to guide us is one that may linger as we move into the New Year. I want to share with you the reflection I chose for our Longest Night worship service this year. Most of these words are Barbara Brown Taylor’s. Some of them are mine. I pray that all of them might bring you courage and comfort in the lengthening days ahead. May the God of the light and the darkness be with you, today and always.

Rev. Melanie
Continue of page 3

Into the Darkness

*Adapted from the introduction to **Learning to Walk in the Dark***

by Barbara Brown Taylor

“Come inside now, it’s getting dark.”

That is my mother speaking, saying the same thing she said every night when she looked out the kitchen window and saw that the sun was going down. It did not matter whether the window was in Kansas, or Ohio, Alabama or Georgia.

Dark was dark, and she wanted her children inside.

The dangerousness of the dark was like a law of gravity. No one could say exactly how it worked, but everyone agreed on it. When night fell, children were gathered inside, front porch lights were switched on, curtains were drawn, and doors were locked. The inside of the house became a showcase of artificial light.

There was nothing you could not do in a house like that. Even if you got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, small night-lights plugged into every baseboard outlet would guide you to your destination like an airplane making a landing after dark.

When we look around the world today, it seems clear that eliminating darkness is pretty high on the human agenda – not just physical darkness, but psychological, emotional, and spiritual darkness. It’s also clear that most people don’t always know what they mean by ‘darkness’ except that they want to stay out of it.

Just say the word and the associations begin to flow:

Night, nightmare, ghost, graveyard, cave, bat, vampire, death, devil, evil, criminal, danger, doubt, depression, loss, fear. Fear is the main thing.

Almost everyone is afraid of being afraid.

Darkness is shorthand for anything that scares us – that we want no part of – either because we are sure we don’t have the resources to survive it or because we do not want to find out.

And yet,

“I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is only one logical conclusion I can reach.

We need the darkness as much as we need the light.”

The problem is, there are so few people who can teach us how to contend with the dark, whether the stuff that scares us is outside or inside of us. If we want to learn how to be happy and stay that way, how to win out over our adversaries at work, or how to avoid aging by eating the right foods, there is a book for that.

If you are not a reader, there are podcasts and videos, TikToks and influencers that will tell you all about the latest strategies for staying out of dark places... or at least distract you from them for a little while.

Most of us own so many electronic devices there is always a lightbox within reach when any kind of darkness begins to descend on us.

Why watch the sun go down when we could watch the news instead?

We might wish we could turn to the church for help, but our faith isn't very good at teaching us how to embrace the darkness either. From earliest times, Christians have used “darkness” as a synonym for sin, ignorance, spiritual blindness, and death. Visit almost any church and you can still hear it used that way today: *Deliver us, O Lord, from the powers of darkness. Shine into our hearts the brightness of your Holy Spirit, and protect us from all perils and dangers of the night.*

Theologically, this language creates all sorts of problems. It divides every day in two, pitting the light part against the dark part. It tucks all the sinister stuff into the dark part, identifying God with the sunny part and leaving us to deal with the rest on our own time. It implies things about dark-skinned people and sight-impaired people that are not true. Worst of all, it offers us, people of faith, a giant closet in which we can store everything that threatens or frightens us without thinking too much about those things. It rewards us for our unconsciousness, and our unwillingness to examine the shadow side of things.

Tonight is the longest night of the year. This is the time, in our part of the world, when physical darkness is at its deepest, when the shadow side of life, our grief, our uncertainty, our loss and fear beckon us closer and invite us to see the holy in the midst of what is painful or unknown. Tonight we are invited to ask:

“What would our life with God look like if we trusted the natural rhythm of spiritual darkness and light instead of opposing it?”

How much more could be in store for us if we could learn to walk in the dark?

In so many ways, as Christians across our culture, we are looking into the dark right now. Attendance is down, debt is up. Plenty of smaller churches are closing or at least putting their buildings up for sale. Learning to walk in the dark is an especially valuable skill in times like these - or maybe it's **remembering** how to walk in the dark - since people of faith have deep pockets of wisdom about how to live through long nights in the wilderness. We just forgot, most of us, once we got to where we were going and the glory days began.

Remembering takes time, like straightening a bent leg and waiting for the feeling to return. It cannot be rushed, no matter how badly we want to get to where we are going. The first thing we have to do is give up running the show. Next we have to give ourselves permission to bump into some things that may frighten us at first. Finally, we ask the darkness to teach us what we need to know.

In the meantime, here is some good news we can use: even when light fades and darkness falls - as it does every single day, in every single life - God does not turn the world over to some other deity. The God of all the ages, The One who created the darkness, stands in it, right here with us. Unafraid. For as the Psalmist teaches us, "Darkness is not dark to God. The night is as bright as the day."

Beloved children of God, children of the light and the darkness,
let us walk into the long night together...

Or, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes: **"Come outside now. It's getting dark."**
Amen.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION-FAITH FORMATION & FELLOWSHIP



Please join us for an

Epiphany Celebration

January 4th, 2026 at 12pm

Join us after church for a delicious community meal! After you eat, you will have the opportunity to explore prayer and activity stations celebrating Epiphany!



INTRODUCTION TO THE SACRAMENTS

SUNDAY JANUARY 18 12PM
SUNDAY JANUARY 25 12PM

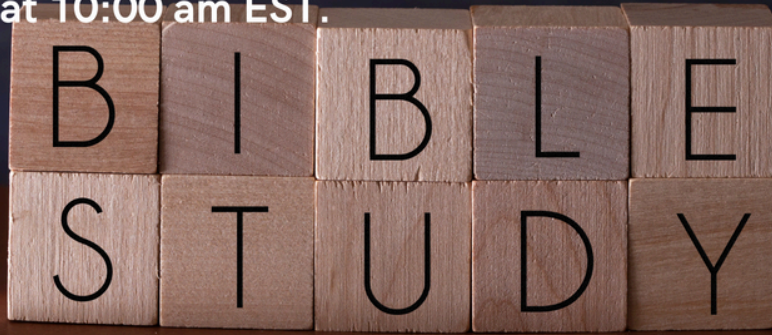


@RivieraChurch

All ages are welcome to join us to learn and remember why we celebrate the sacraments of Communion and Baptism! Join us in the Spirit Center after Church on the last two Sundays of January! Snack will be provided!

Stay tuned for further details.

In-person or virtually
Sundays at 10:00 am EST.



Zoom Information

Meeting ID: 894-7650-2156

Passcode: 333227



Adult Bible Study at Riviera Presbyterian Church

Come as you are and bring your questions—our Adult Bible Study is a space for open hearts, thoughtful conversation, and spiritual growth. Whether you're deeply rooted in scripture or just beginning to explore, you'll find a welcoming community ready to journey with you through the stories, challenges, and wisdom of the Bible. It's another opportunity for lively conversation about faith and how it shapes our lives today. Let's grow together in faith and understanding.



Women's Study Group will be announcing their new 2026 study soon. Stay tuned.

LIVING OUR MISSION ...



In November, Michele Ready and Emma Cottrell delivered 20 Aldi gift certificates to kids from food-insecure families at Frances Tucker Elementary. We received the following note from one of the mothers:

Hello,

My daughter is a student at FS Tucker & she received a gift card to help with Thanksgiving. I just wanted to take time to say thank you. It was needed and very much appreciated. Have a great day & holiday season!



In December, we collected gifts for all the first graders at Frances Tucker Elementary. Ellen Anderson and Emma Cottrell delivered them, and a good (and VERY noisy) time was had by all.

This year, LEAP had six women come out of incarceration and expect one more on December 22nd. We gave each of them a Target gift card to help them start their new journey. Three women in the LEAP house will receive \$50 Target gift cards for holiday shopping.

We have a Dragonfly Thrift Boutique donation box in the Welcome Area/Narthex for new & gently used women's & men's clothing, shoes and accessories, tableware & glassware, kitchenware & small appliances. When it is full, we have it picked up, and a new box is delivered. If you have any large furniture items you wish to donate, please send a description & photo of the item to info@dragonflythrift.org prior to bringing it to Dragonfly.



The Food Pantry has given out nearly 100 individual bags of food and necessities this past year. These are put together for the unhoused individuals in our community. If interested in joining this mission, please see Ellen Anderson. In November, the CCC held a very successful food drive for the pantry, which filled the shelves.



Socktober was a success. Thanks to the generosity of our community, we collected 450 pairs of white socks, with 130 pairs donated by CCC families. Fifty pairs will support our individual food bags, and 400 pairs were shared with Camillus House for their Street Foot Care Program, founded by former member and church friend Isabelle Hill-Smith.

Happy New Year!
Ellen Anderson



We are delighted to congratulate the Child Care Center at Riviera Presbyterian Church on being named Gold Winner for Best Daycare in Miami-Dade and Bronze Winner for Best Preschool in Miami-Dade.

This wonderful recognition reflects the strong program standards established 45 years ago and faithfully carried forward ever since.

Serving the broader community with dedicated leadership and caring teachers, the Child Care Center continues to offer a place where children are nurtured, families are supported, and excellence is lived out each day. We are so proud of this remarkable ministry and all who make it possible.

Our sanctuary was filled with parents, grandparents, and siblings eagerly awaiting the Preschoolers' Holiday Show.

Their performance was a joy to witness, and they did a wonderful job this year.



SPF – STEWARDSHIP, PROPERTY, FINANCE



A Message from Carol, Church Bookkeeper

- Contribution statements will be sent out by January 31, 2026
- If you need to file your taxes before January 31, please contact me at rivierapresfinance@gmail.com – Subject: 2025 Contribution Statement
- Checks received in early January can only be posted to 2025 if postmarked by December 31, 2025.



A Message from Barbie, Church Administrator

Serve Where You Feel Called

Riviera's worship and community life are made richer through the gifts of those who step forward to serve. We invite members and church friends to consider participating in one (or more) of our Sunday and special-service ministries.

- Opportunities include serving as a liturgist on the Sunday of your choice.
- Providing snacks for Holy Grounds.
- Helping as an Elder or Deacon to serve communion.
- Welcoming others as a greeter/usher on Sunday mornings or during special worship services.

Each role helps create a spirit of hospitality, care, and shared leadership that reflects who we are as a community of faith.

You can sign up easily online at

<https://rivierachurch.org/volunteer-opportunities/>

To stay connected and informed, we also encourage you to sign up on our website to receive Riviera's weekly and monthly communications.

- Friday – One More Thing
- Friday Meditation written by Elder Mimi Sutherland
- Sunday Reminder e-newsletter
- monthly The Spark newsletter

Visit <https://rivierachurch.org/> to subscribe and stay connected to all that is happening at Riviera.

Serving together is one of the ways we grow in faith and community—and there's a place for you.

DECEMBER @RPC



Prayground



Lighting the Advent Candles



Thank you, Ms. Angie



Christmas Cantata



Pastor Melanie is showing off the reversible stole that the congregation presented to her.