



This is February 21, 2021...The First Sunday of Lent

On behalf of the family of faith at Community United Church of Christ, Medford, WI, welcome to this time of worship!

“No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here!”

Invocation:

Let us begin with prayer: To you, O God, we lift our thoughts and our lives. We reach out to you today, hoping for new signs of covenant promise like in the rainbow days of Noah. Here we sometimes sense that we have seen signs and have heard your voice. Here we feel obligated to repent of our wrongdoings, but, do not know what repentance looks like or sounds like. Guide us so that we may clear our eyes of the glaze of indifference and apathy: so that we may clear out distractions and obsessions. What shall we say? What shall we do? Gracious God, restore to us the joy of our salvation, that we begin our Lenten journey in the wilderness with Jesus. Amen.

Now in our “virtual” Worship, Pam O. will be reading the scripture:

This is a reading from the **Gospel of Mark**, chapter 1, verses 9 through 15, the Common English Bible

Jesus is baptized and tempted

9 About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River.

10 While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. 11 And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”

12 At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

Jesus’ message

14 After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God’s good news, 15 saying, “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

(Thank you, Pam!) This God’s word...may it never stop sounding in our ears!

Today’s Message today is entitled, “Why Bother?”

Please pray with me: Holy God, you call us out of our own personal “winter” and lead us through yet unforeseen paths to spring. We lift our joys and our burdens to you wrapped in hope. Free us from Satan’s temptation and send your angels to guard us from danger, too. Help us to recognize that your love is sustaining us and guiding us each day, as we turn to you the name of Jesus, who speaks to us, too, “Now is the time!” Amen

Why bother with Lent?

To answer that question, Lent has been known as a period of preparation and fasting that was observed before the Easter festival since apostolic times. The practice was not formalized until the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. It was a time to prepare of candidates for baptism and a time of penance for grievous sinners who were excluded from Communion and were preparing for their restoration. As a sign penitence, they wore sackcloth and were sprinkled with ashes. This form of public penance began to die out in the 9th century, and it became customary for all the faithful to be reminded of the need for penitence by receiving an ashes on their foreheads on the first day of Lent—thus the name, Ash Wednesday.

Why bother with Lent? Because it allows us to take part in spiritual disciplines.

Musicians and athletes understand discipline. No musician will remain a *good musician* for very long without regular practice. An athlete will lose strength and stamina without the discipline of regular workouts. Concert-goers and fans will take notice.

Lent is a time for discipline too. We could consider it as spring training for us *Christians*, who want to stay in shape, or who want to *get back into shape*...spiritually, that is.

Peter Gomes, in an article in Pulpit Digest, wrote this: "No one is so well off spiritually that he or she can afford to ignore Lent. And no one is so bad off spiritually that Lent can't be helpful.

—Peter Gomes, "Confessions and consequences," in *Pulpit Digest*, January/February 1994, p. 23-29.

Where do we start? By following Jesus. Did you notice that in the scripture today, we heard the words, *the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness*? The King James Version of the Bible translates it like this: *...the spirit driveth him into the wilderness*. The International Children's Bible reads like this: *Then the Spirit sent Jesus into the desert alone*.

We refer to the forty days of Lent as a journey or a wilderness time. Wouldn't it be nice to take a camping trip out in the woods...well, maybe not this week. But, imagine it, if you will...the Spirit sending us. What would it look like if we willingly went into the wilderness for forty days? Think about it. What you would do. Would you make it for forty days? Just you.

Wait, you're thinking, "Been there, done that, for almost 365 days now!" I can't argue that point, but could I talk you into five minutes of wilderness time every day until April 4th? What would it look like? What would it *sound* like? Turn the tv off. Shut down the computer. Sit in a chair you do not often sit in. Close your eyes and just breathe. You could start now. With a few days' practice, you might find that you will want to expand your *wilderness time* to last a few more minutes...and then a few more. You might even hear God's still small voice. You might get some clarity of purpose. You might be able to relax and feel like a new person! Feel revived. This spiritual practice can't hurt.

In the wonderful story of the covenant God made with Noah, God promises to never forget us, nor any of the creatures that have been created. God has made a covenant with Noah to never again destroy the earth because of the sinfulness of human beings. As a sign of this promise, God creates the rainbow.

It's a promise without any "if" clauses. There is no such statement as, "If you love me" or "If you obey me" or "If you worship me" or "If you brush your teeth" or "If you help someone across the street"

...then I will be good to you! It is an unconditional covenant of love in which God has promised to remember us even if we forget God. No matter what we have done, when we stand at the door and knock, God won't ask, "Who's there?" We will be welcomed in. We will be welcomed back.

We began today by following Jesus into the wilderness. Next, I want you to take note of Jesus coming out and beginning his public ministry. Mark is very concise in his description of it. "Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news, saying, "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!" (Common English Bible) The King James Version translates it like this: *Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel."*

The International Children's Bible reads like this, *Jesus went into Galilee and preached the Good News from God. Jesus said, "The right time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Change your hearts and lives and believe the Good News!"*

Why bother with Lent? Because we too often forget to repent. We are convinced we do not need to change our lives. We need to be reminded to trust the good news of the Gospel and to remember that God loves us wherever we are on our life's journey. No matter what we have done. Lent is a time when we may notice that God calling us to turn around and begin again. To not give up. Remember that while beginning this spiritual *spring training*... on purpose, during our wilderness moments in the coming days.

Have you ever walked on a tread mill? Whenever I think I need to be walking on one, I remember why I am not too fond of that sort of exercise. It might feel like walking, but, I'm not "getting anywhere." It is something like praying and praying and waiting and feeling like our prayers have not been heard. Let prayer be the "spring tonic" of our spiritual discipline routine.

Be intent about getting in touch with God. Perhaps it will mean slowing the pace a bit and looking back where we've been, even if it is the same old place, and looking ahead to where God seems to be sending us. With every bit of faith that we can muster up, we can repent, turn around and repeat; we can ask forgiveness and be thankful and repeat; we can pray and pray again and repeat. Don't think of ways to try to get out of it!

There is a story told about a man name Sam who wasn't making much headway with his diet. He was one of those folks who could resist everything but temptation. One day, he came into the office with a whole box of freshly baked cinnamon rolls.

When his friends questioned him about how this was fitting into his diet plan, he explained, "I wouldn't have bought the rolls, if it hadn't been for God. "What do you mean"? someone asked.

"Well," he said, "as I was about to pass the bakery, I prayed that if it were God's will for me to have these cinnamon rolls today, I would be able to find a parking place in front of the building. And, sure enough, I found a space right in front ...on the eighth time around the block"

Why bother with Lent? It's because during Lent, the Church wakes us from our winter angst and points us, using scripture and song and rich traditions...to the joy of our salvation. Let's find that joy in some spiritual faith-renewing practice. Let's find joy in reading a daily devotional...and let's not blame anyone but ourselves if we slip up along the way.

Take some time each day and imagine being in the wilderness. Sit in silence; think and to pray. Examine your life and ask yourself if there is something you can do to be more loving and caring.

In your hoping and dreaming; in your spring cleaning of house and mind and body, believe that God has something better in store for us all. Is that what you would call good news? It is exactly why we cannot afford to ignore Lent or the opportunity for some **spiritual exercise** within the next thirty-six days.

Rev Barbara Brown Taylor, suggests: "After Jesus was baptized, he spent forty days in the wilderness... he didn't look for a way out of it...the only company he had was God, Satan, wild animals and ministering angels. He faced temptation there."

Thank about these things. Remember. Pray without ceasing and believe every bit of good news that you hear each time you read or hear the words of the Gospel. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *The Way to Freedom*, he writes: "The word of scripture should never stop sounding in your ears and working in you all day long."

Before we know it, it will be Easter, and we will be in better spiritual shape. God will take note.

Take a deep breath... and let it out.

Time for Prayer: Let's spend a few moments in silent prayer. Hear our thoughts and words of repentance now, loving God. Enfold us in the good news that we can trust in your unconditional love! Let these days of Lent be spent in realizing that it is possible, with your help, to "turn around" from our foolish ways and to resist the temptations that surround us.

Hear our prayers for those who are hurting, those who are suffering with disease and injury, for those who are mourning the loss of loved ones; for those who wouldn't even be thinking to ask us to pray for them. We ask your blessings on our church family, on all of the faith communities around us, on our families of birth and adoption and on our friends far and near.

Lead us and guide us in our repenting that we may realize hope in your forgiveness and in the possible changes of new life. You are already there in the days ahead of us, watching and waiting for us to turn to you again!

We pray for our church that you would guide and lead us in our planning, in our mission efforts, in our call to welcome one another as you have welcomed us. We pray for people we have hurt and for those who have hurt us. Make us bold to reach out, to forgive where we can and to trust your power where we cannot.

We pray, O God, for those you have placed upon our hearts and minds this day...the people in the South experiencing a “Wisconsin winter,” loss of electricity and water and homes...and those families whose loved one have lost their lives.

We thank you for loving families and forgiving friends. We pray, O God, for those you have placed upon our hearts and in our minds today...bless, heal and strengthen all who we hold before you now... Maggie M, Dan and Albert, Tamara C, Phil G, Christine D, Rev. Dale and Jackie, Cathy S, Rick and Teresa G, Jamie H, Angie, Shelly B, Mike G-P, Matt L and Angie; for those who are grieving the loss of loved ones.

We pray that you will nudge us when we need it most, in the name of Jesus. We boldly prayer in his words: Our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins and we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but, deliver us from evil. for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen

Hymn: “The Old Rugged Cross” #260

Verse 1: On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame.
And I love that old cross, where the dearest and best, for a world of lost sinners was slain.

**Chorus: So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, 'til my trophies at last I lay down.
I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it some day for a crown.**

Verse 2: O the old rugged cross, so despised by the world, has a wondrous attraction for me.
For the dear Lamb of God left his glory above to bear it to dark Calvary!

**Chorus: So, I'll cherish the old rugged cross, 'til my trophies at last I lay down.
I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it some day for a crown.**

Verse 3: In the old rugged cross stained with blood so divine, a wondrous beauty I see.
For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died, to pardon and sanctify me.

**Chorus: So, I'll cherish the old rugged cross, 'til my trophies at last I lay down.
I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it some day for a crown.**

Verse 4: To the old rugged cross I will ever be true; its shame and reproach gladly bear.
Then he'll call me some day to my home far away, where his glory forever I'll share.

**Chorus: So, I'll cherish the old rugged cross, 'til my trophies at last I lay down.
I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it some day for a crown.**

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This is our time of intention and thanks

Let us turn our thoughts to what we will give for the support of church's ministries. No matter the size or the shape, each and every gift of time, talent and treasure can made a difference. Thank you to each of you who have, by your gifts, have made it possible for bills to be paid and for our outreach into the community to continue.

Let us dedicate our gifts: As we share what we have received from your hand, O God, our lives have been opened to appreciate your blessings. We give in response to your generosity and dedicate all that we offer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen

Benediction: Go now and God bless us one and all as we navigate these wilderness days.

Praise be to God, who is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or imagine!

This time of worship has come to an end, let our service continue.

Peace be with you and be safe!

Wednesday Devotional, February 24, The Seventh Day of Lent (not counting Sundays!)

It is nice that we can be together, even though apart, in this “Time for Pause!”

Let’s sing a hymn that is over 100 years old: “Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days”

Verse 1: Lord who throughout these forty days, for us did fast and pray;
Teach us with you to mourn our sins and close by you to stay.

Verse 2: As you with Satan did contend and did the victory win,
O give us strength in you to fight, in you to conquer sin

Verse 3: And through these days of penitence and through your passion tide,
forevermore in life and death O Lord, with us abide.

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Listen now to a passage from the Gospel of Mark 1:14-15, that draws our attention to repentance:

~from the Common English Bible: 14 After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee
announcing God’s good news, 15 saying, “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom!
Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

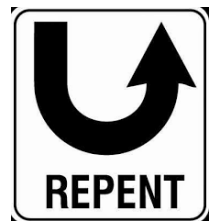
In an Ash Wednesday devotional, Kenneth L. Samuel wrote this: Today, our ashes remain nothing more than ashes, without a commitment to repent for our sins of selfishness and live anew in the Spirit of God’s All-Encompassing Love. *Ashes to Action. Dust to Determination. Amen*

Even though the ashes from Ash Wednesday have been washed away, the sign of the cross is still indelibly marked on our souls. “Now is the time,” says Jesus. It is *always the time*, it is *always the right day*, we are *always in just the right place* to repent of our sins. Pause, look back and remember what repentance sounds like.

Let us pray: Merciful God, hear our thoughts and words of repentance now. Enfold us in the good news that we can trust in your unconditional love! Let these days of Lent be spent in realizing that it is possible, with your help, to “turn around” from our foolish ways and to resist the temptations that surround us.

Hear our prayers for those who are hurting, those who are suffering with disease and injury, for those who are mourning the loss of loved ones; for those who wouldn’t even be thinking to ask us to pray for them. We ask your blessings on our church family, on all of the faith communities around us, on our families of birth and adoption and on our friends far and near.

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**The blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer and Comforter is with us
during these days of Lent and always!**

Pastor Mary Jo

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