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The Messenger

St. John's United Church of Christ



Message from the Pastor

My friends,

Lent is nearly upon us. The season is one of baptism and repentance, of trial and tribulation. And then...

I won't spoil the ending. But I do want to seize on the prospect of repentance that we are invited to consider by the words of the Baptizer. Emerging from the wilderness and approaching the shores of the holy river, Jordan, "He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'" (Mark 1:7-8, NRSV) There appears to be a choice here, of sorts. A baptism of water by the river bed of Jordan, sweet Jordan, the ancestral place of the Hebrew tribes. Or, a baptism with the Holy Spirit...

Now the River Jordan was a powerful river, and its waters fed a fertile valley on which ancient civilizations had come to depend. Approaching its banks, immersing oneself in it, and uttering sacred words of blessing; well, it would be difficult to imagine a more extraordinary experience in the lives of our ancestors in faith. And yet this “holy spirit” thing – that is, capital “H”, Holy and capital “S”, Spirit – this Holy Spirit thing was something altogether different. It was unknown and mysterious, something so close to the Divine as to be integrated in it. Beyond awesome, Holy Spirit was fearsome!

Comes to the river this one person in response to the Baptizer’s call, up from Nazareth of Galilee. Down he goes under John’s hand; up he rises, drenched in holy water. And then the story says, “...a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (vs 11) A choice is implied by the words of the Baptizer. But are we so bold as to claim it?

American theologian William Willimon wrote of the new century church: “(We live) in an ethically debilitating climate.” He says that, “John’s word strikes abrasively against the easy certainties of the religious Establishment. He will let us take no comfort in our rites, tradition, or ancestry.” Think about this, my friends. Are we so bold as to claim this baptism? As Ash Wednesday approaches (March 2nd, and there will be a Zoom service beginning at 7:00 that evening), can you imagine yourself being invited to consider your baptism or the prospect thereof?

The ancient church was shocked to hear this story of Jesus coming to repent and be baptized. Perhaps it is a story of assembly, a story of the Divine reunion of God-Holy Spirit-Christ. It is most certainly a story of invitation. Willimon closes his message with this: “In all this I hear the simple assertion that we must submit to change if we would be formed into this cruciform faith. We may come singing ‘Just As I Am’, but we will not stay by being our same old selves. The needs of the world are too great, the suffering and pain too extensive, the lures of the world too seductive for us to begin to change the world unless we are changed, unless conversion of life and morals becomes our pattern.”

And so I wonder, are we so bold?

Blessing in this, and all seasons!

Pastor Tom

A special note:

Dear church, thanks to you all for your support during this time of healing and recovery for me. Your contributions of food and presence and prayer are very much appreciated. I can feel the love... and I love you back!

Pastor Tom

President's Message

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Matthew 22:37-40

In last month's message I suggested, especially with the dawning of the new year, that as a church we need to be open to new things, to new approaches, and to the possibility of changes of all sorts.

On January 23rd, we had the opportunity to hear a sermon from UCC Associate Central Atlantic Conference Minister Rev. Marvin Silver, and about 20 people stayed on Zoom with Rev. Silver for an after-worship forum to discuss some options for future ministry at St. John's and to provide an opportunity for those present to share their views on the future of St. John's.

Among other things, Rev. Silver counseled us, as we start approaching the conclusion of Pastor Tom's Interim Ministry, to not be in a rush to search for our next settled pastor, but to take time to pause and reflect and engage in prayerful discernment of St. John's long-term mission and purpose. He suggested that we provide room for growth and be open to opportunities for each of us to develop a greater relationship with God, with the church, and with our community. To that end, Rev. Silver challenged us to figure out who we are as a church, who are our neighbors whom we are called to serve and how we can better use our building in that service, and who God is calling us to become. He also suggested that we might want to consider some additional period of transitional ministry to help us re-imagine what God is calling St. John's to be before calling a settled pastor.

In response, several our congregation expressed a desire for St. John's to be a more active presence in our immediate neighborhood and community; to make our building available for more community activities; and to reach out to the community and “let them know we're here”.

Several people expressed the need for us to “let go of the way things have always been at St. John's.” As Rev. Silver said, if you keep doing the same things in the same way, you're going to keep getting the same results. We need to recognize that society has changed significantly, and continues to change, and if we (along with other traditional Protestant churches) are to remain relevant and truly live up to our mission statement of “living God's love and all are invited”, we will need to change as well.

We need to work together to discern a new vision to adapt to a changing landscape, and consider how to use our church assets (people, building and finances), to support St. John's current and future mission.

As we seek to develop that vision, on March 6th, after worship, there will be a workshop to which all are invited, to discuss who we are and who we are called to become. More details will be available in the March "Messenger" and e-Blasts. Your input is valued and needed.

This month we observe Valentine's Day, and there isn't a better time to think about love. The biblical quotations above, which should seem very familiar, call us to love God (as God loves us), and to love others as ourselves. Change is challenging, and I suggest that we approach change at St. John's with love – love for those who have gone before us since 1843, leaving us a beautiful legacy of spirit and service on which to build; love for each other as we discern the way forward; and love for our neighbors who need our love and our service.

Happy Valentine's Day,

Jeff

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February Devotional

Ephesians 3:20-21

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.”

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; and all the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

When Reverend King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and spoke these words, it was with passion and boldness. His words are a true embodiment of the Lord’s work. He was not afraid to dream big for God and his plan.

We might have a lot of fear in our own dreams. We worry that something can’t be achieved exactly the way we think it should. We fear disappointing family or friends. We fear disappointing ourselves. We even fear the thought of failing more than actually failing. We need daily reminders that God has a love for us that never fails. It is all we are able to know and will not let us down or disappoint us.

Often, we don’t see the forest for the trees. God’s work is hard to see sometimes when we are in the middle of His plan. We get in the way with our selfishness and ambition. But no matter how selfish or ambitious or even scared we are, the Lord can handle all of it. God’s means for accomplishing all of it is a strength we can always fall back on. We will never be without that strength because God can answer our prayers beyond anything we can comprehend or dream. When you are amazed at an answer God gave to your prayer, reflect on Ephesians 3:20-21. There is nothing impossible with the Lord.

Terri Weaver

February Mission of the Month: Voice of Jubilee

Our February Mission of the Month is the Voices of Jubilee at Bon Air Juvenile Correction Center, which supports incarcerated youth through worship, singing, community building and pastoral care. This care includes letter writing, community conversations, pastoral care visits, mentoring and advocating for the youth, and providing periodic care packages and holiday gifts. The worshipping community includes incarcerated youth, returning citizens, former prison guards, and those longing for the liberative word of the Gospel. Those who were able to participate in our January 16th worship service heard in the presentations by co-pastors Rev. Lauren Ramseur and Rev. Ashley Mujias and the moving testimony of Mr. Rojai Fentress how critical this ministry and support is to the youth at Bon Air Juvenile Correction Center, both while they are incarcerated and after their release. Please be generous in your support.

February Announcements

Bible Study Resumes February 23rd

Our Wednesday night Bible Study of the Book of Genesis concluded on February 2nd, and we thank our co-facilitators, Scott Siefert and Rev. Tom Gerstenlauer, for leading us on this journey. Scott assumed a position on February 1st as Sole Pastor for St. John's United Church of Christ in Norwood-Young America, MN, and in light of his new responsibilities will not be able to continue as co-facilitator of our bible studies. We thank him for his leadership of Bible Study during the past nearly two years. After a two-week break, on February 23rd we will begin studying Marcus Borg's book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*, which addresses how we can appreciate the essential elements of the Old and New Testaments in a way that can open up a new world of intelligent faith.

All are welcome to join other members of our blessed community to study the Word. Jeff Jacobs will be placing a bulk order for the book (to avoid shipping charges), so please contact him at jwjacobs9@gmail.com or (202) 361-9887 if you would like one. The cost is \$16.99, but if cost is an issue the church can help; just let Jeff know. And if you have any questions about the study, or would like to register, please contact our facilitator, Rev. Tom Gerstenlauer, at (413) 378-0828 or revtgerst@gmail.com.

Ash Wednesday Service March 2nd

This year Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of Lent, will be on March 2nd, and there will be a worship service by Zoom that evening at 7:00 PM. As there was last year, there will be small containers of ashes available for pick-up by the back door of the church beginning February 22nd, to be used during the service or for self-imposition. In addition, we will be distributing Ash Wednesday kits to the public in front of the church during that day; if you are interested in helping with distribution please contact Jeff Jacobs at jwjacobs9@gmail.com or (202) 361-9887.

Guest Preacher – The Rev. Lindsey Franklin

Rev. Franklin is a recently-ordained pastor in the United Church of Christ, currently serving as the Associate Pastor for Development at Richmond Hill— an ecumenical monastery and retreat center with a mission to seek God's healing in metropolitan Richmond. She first arrived in Richmond for a summer in 2017, looking to deepen her commitment to racial justice, connect with her southern roots, and discern her call to ministry. After moving here permanently following graduation from Harvard Divinity School in 2018, she served as Richmond Hill's Interim Associate Pastor for a year before answering the call to focus more deeply on the intersection of ministry and stewardship. She was ordained in December 2020 in the Richmond Hill Chapel, over Zoom by her home church in Middlebury, Vermont, with the blessing of her new church home, St. John's UCC. She is the current chair of the Potomac Association Justice & Witness Committee.

February Announcements

Interim Ministry Plan

Our Interim Pastor, The Rev. Tom Gerstenlauer, has been working with us to prepare St. John's for the next phase of our ministry. In furtherance of this effort, several congregation-wide meetings, both in-person and by Zoom, are planned in early 2022. One of these was on January 23rd, when Rev. Marvin Silver, the UCC Central Atlantic Conference Associate Minister, was our Guest Preacher and led a forum after worship to discuss ministry options for St. John's. Another will be held after worship on March 6th. Please watch the weekly e-Blast for more information, and feel free to contact any Church Council member — David and Marcie Agee, Betsy Bighinatti, David Craig, Kathy Freise, Jeff Jacobs, Daniel Martin, Lynn Snyder, Jeff Michel or Terri Weaver — if you have any questions or comments.

Pastoral Care

Our Interim Pastor, The Rev. Tom Gerstenlauer, is available to provide spiritual support and pastoral care to our congregation. He can be reached at revtgerst@gmail.com or (413) 378-0828. Pastor Tom had ankle surgery on January 7th, and we are keeping him in our prayers for a good recovery. He asked us to share this note of appreciation with the congregation:

Dear church,

Thanks to you all for your support during this time of healing and recovery for me. Your contributions of food and presence and prayer are very much appreciated. I can feel the love... and I love you back!

Pastor Tom

Covid Update

In light of the increasing numbers of Covid infections, St. John's has suspended in-person Sunday worship for at least the month of January, and has returned to worship by Zoom alone. The Church Council will continue to monitor public health metrics and guidance and will consider a return to in-person worship when conditions improve. Please watch for further announcements in the weekly e-Blast.

February 2021 Calendar

Wednesday, February 2nd, 7 p.m. — Bible Study by Zoom (last session on Genesis)

Thursday, February 3rd, 9 a.m. — Renovations Committee meeting by Zoom

Sunday, February 6th, 10 a.m. — Worship by Zoom, with Communion

Thursday, February 10th, 9 a.m. — Renovations Committee meeting by Zoom

Sunday, February 13th, 10 a.m. — Worship by Zoom

Tuesday, February 15th, 7 p.m. — Church Council meeting by Zoom

Thursday, February 17th, 9 a.m. — Renovations Committee meeting by Zoom

Sunday, February 20th, 10 a.m. — Worship by Zoom, Rev. Lindsey Franklin, Guest Preacher

Wednesday, February 23rd, 7 p.m. — Bible Study by Zoom (first session on Reading the Bible Again for the First Time)

Thursday, February 24th, 9 a.m. — Renovations Committee meeting by Zoom

Sunday, February 27th, 10 a.m. — Worship by Zoom

February Birthdays

February 7 Griffin Allen
February 10 Kristina Gilbert
February 11 Danny Trent
February 12 Brent Trefsgar
February 17 Helena DeLigt
February 18 Linda Stiegler
February 21 Bryan Totty
February 23 Virginia Clark
February 24 Bud Higgins
February 24 Theresa Pollock
February 25 Shirley Townsend
February 26 Cheryl Goode
February 27 Bettie Staton



St. John's United Church of Christ

St. John's United Church of Christ is a diverse community forming a united congregation, seeking to grow our faith, share it with others, and serve God's people wherever the need is present. We are living God's love and all are invited!!!

An Open and Affirming Congregation

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