

# Welcome!

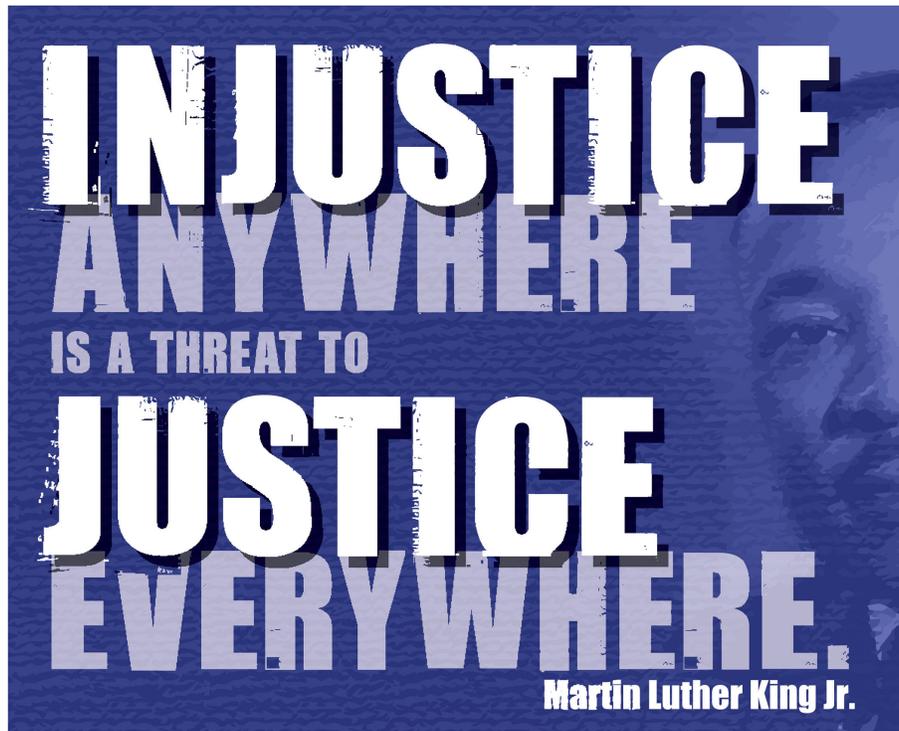
First Congregational Church  
of Webster Groves  
United Church of Christ

*Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.*

JANUARY 17, 2021

SUNDAY OF MLK HOLIDAY WEEKEND  
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

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*We respond to God's call by welcoming everyone  
regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity,  
sexual orientation or socio-economic background.*

*To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, we affirm that  
all may share in the full life, ministry, fellowship, responsibilities  
and blessing of our congregation.*

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,  
you are welcome here.*

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## Order of Worship

### PRELUDE

### WELCOME

Joan Musbach

### TOLLING THE BELL AND LIGHTING THE CANDLES

#### CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leader; **People**) based on a prayer by an Indonesian author

In the depth of silence no words are needed, no language required.

**In the depth of silence we are called to listen.**

Listen to the beating of your heart. Listen to the blowing of the wind, the movement of the Spirit.

**Be silent, says our God, and know that I am God.**

And listen to the cry of the voiceless. Listen to the groaning of the hungry. Listen to the pain of the landless. Listen to the sigh of the oppressed and to the laughter of children.

**For that is authentic communication; listening to... living with... dying for... In these ways, God calls upon us.**

#### RAISING THE COVENANT (Unison)

*Covenant of 1977*

**We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together: to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for peace and justice among all people. We trust God's promise of grace and forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.**

#### HYMN

*Precious Lord, Take My Hand*

T. A. Dorsey

Precious Lord, take my hand,  
lead me on, let me stand:  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.  
Through the storm, through the night,  
lead me on to your light.  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

When my day grows drear,  
precious Lord, linger near,  
when my light is almost gone,  
hear my cry, hear my call,  
hold my hand lest I fall.  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

When the shadows appear,  
and the night draws near,  
and the day is past and gone,  
at the River I stand,  
guide my feet, hold my hand.  
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

#### PRAYER OF APPROACH (Unison)

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Pastor*

**Sovereign God, you sent Jesus to be a light to the nations. And you call all of your people to enlighten the world. By your Spirit, we have been inspired to follow his example of service. Even so inspired, though, we have more often**

chosen the paths of least resistance rather than the path illuminated by your light. Still, we have heard the word of mercy in your invitation to come and follow. Cause us truly to show forth the light of your redemption, so that all those around and among us may recognize that we bear a true word of change and hope; in Christ's name. Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

The Pastors

**SCRIPTURE READINGS**

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Pastor*

*From the Gospels*

John 1:43-51

The Inclusive Bible

<sup>43</sup>The [day after Jesus called Andrew to follow him,] Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. He met Philip and said, "Follow me."

<sup>44</sup>Philip came from Bethsaida, the same town as Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup>Philip sought out Nathanael and said to him, "We have found the One that Moses spoke of in the law, the One about whom the prophets wrote: Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary and Joseph."

<sup>46</sup>"From Nazareth?" said Nathanael. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

"Come and see," replied Philip.

<sup>47</sup>When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he remarked, "This one is a real Israelite. There is no guile in him."

<sup>48</sup>"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked him.

Jesus answered, "Before Philip even went to call you, while you were sitting under the fig tree, I saw you."

<sup>49</sup>"Rabbi," said Nathanael, "you are God's very own! You are the ruler of Israel!"

<sup>50</sup>Jesus said, "Do you believe just because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You'll see greater things than that!" <sup>51</sup>Jesus went on to tell him, "The truth of the matter is, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Chosen One."

*Response.*

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

**Thanks be to God.**

**ANTHEM**

*The Call*

George Herbert  
Ralph Vaughan Williams

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:  
such a way as gives us breath;  
such a truth as ends all strife;  
such a life as conquers death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:  
such a light as shows a feast;  
such a feast as mends in length;  
such a strength as makes a guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:  
such a joy as none can move:  
such a love as none can part;  
such a heart as joys in love.

A hidden subject in the gospels is the matter of what happens when Jesus calls a person. And, let's remember, Jesus calls everyone. It's simply a matter of whether and how we respond that determines the outcome of that call.

So, we – theoretically at least – set aside one way of living and adopt a new one. We are transformed. Even we who have always been in the Church have done this. We've changed our denomination or personal practices. We've taken up residence with another in marrying or adopting, or changed careers. Nobody's left out of this experience of spiritual transformation.

Addicts understand this as the second step in their recovery, recognizing that one is powerless to change oneself without help from a Higher Power.

Society bears this out. Recidivism among those who have been incarcerated or who have undergone some reformatory therapy reveal how trying to practice newfound skills in our old environment can be self-defeating... like residing for a time at a detox center and then relapsing into addiction or something as simple as failing to follow a diet. Even if we approach a new way of living that is generally better for us, there's something within us often, reluctant to try new things and causing us to slip back into self-destructive ways.

So The Call is one thing; the follow-through is entirely another. And this condition among us prompts me to ask a question with regard to God's power: *Is God Irresistible?* And, believe it or not, I'm going to spend three Sundays with you thinking about this.

There was an entire movement in the Congregational Church which divided it, three hundred years ago: the notion of affirming God's power by saying that God is indeed irresistible. We called it Universalism, because proponents insist that no one is consigned to hell forever; salvation eventually is universal.

And the sentiment is still common among Christians, to this day. Why, as recently as five years ago, Rob Bell left the pastorate of his evangelical Mars Hill Church in Grandhill, Michigan, because the realization had come to him that a God who would cause anyone or anything to suffer for all of eternity, for some time-bound disobedience, is not someone he could worship. One fundamental power of God is irresistibility, Bell would come to say along with Universalist Christians who had been saying so since the late 1700s.

And, believe me, I do not wish to deny the power of God. But neither do I want to deny the willfulness of any child of God. So, I admit to you hear, I am not necessarily convinced either by the Universalists or by Rev. Bell. But still I ask, *Is God irresistible?*

As evidence of God's attractiveness, I would point us metaphorically toward that story we heard a moment ago, of Jesus and his first three or four disciples, who are not the ones we customarily think of as being the first. In the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the first four disciples are the four fishers (Simon, Andrew, James, and John), and I'll refer to them, next week.

In the gospel according to John, the first three or four indeed include Andrew and Simon (two of the four fishers), but the next two are definitely not the top-shelf disciples we usually talk about. They are the second tier Philip and Nathanael.

You might ask of John, *Why tell **their** stories so early... or at all?*

I think that the answer is this: because of how differently Jesus approaches them than he does Andrew and Peter. Andrew? He's the first in John's narrative. Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist who was so intrigued by Jesus that he asked him, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" to which Jesus replied, "Come and see." And he did... and never went back to John but instead went off and collected his brother Simon who, when Jesus saw him, said, "Shimon barJonah, you are to be called, *Cephas* (Peter, in Greek)," which is as much as to say, "Wow. I'm calling you, Rock."

Now, that is part of the fun of Jesus calling you. If he likes, he'll change your name.

Jesus was noted for giving people he liked nicknames such as that, according to John.

Thomas he called “the Twin,” which I can only assume he did because both of them were so good-looking. The writer of John’s gospel says, without identifying himself by a given name, that Jesus always referred to them as, “Beloved.” And with all the Marys in the band, each of them got specific designations – “the Magdalene,” of course, but also “Mother.” If John was the only gospel we ever read, it would appear that only Philip and Andrew went without nicknames among Jesus’ followers.

To Philip Jesus did not say, “Come and see,” but “Follow me.” And Philip complied.

And when Jesus met Nathanael, he called him, “guileless.” “Here is a man in whom there is no deceit!” Jesus presumed to say.

But it wasn’t necessarily presumption, we find out. Because Nathanael’s reply is “How did you get to know me?” or maybe, “Who told you about me?”

Jesus answers, “I saw you idling under the shade of that tree (and on a workday!) before Philip went and got you.” At that point, Nathanael better have been guileless, because he’d been called out. Nathanael then managed to do in the first chapter of John, without a measure of disguise or deceit, what it would take Peter and all the other disciples at least nine chapters to do in any of the other gospels. He recognizes Jesus to be The Messiah, the offspring of God.

It’s an interesting trade in nicknames. Jesus presumes to call Nathanael, “Mr. Guileless.” Nathanael returns the favor, calling Jesus, “Mr. Messiah.”

What do you suppose Jesus has called you? Remember: *affectionate nickname, or else simply your name*. Remember, the name he’s called you has got to make him at least charming, definitely attractive, and maybe irresistible (I’m not saying which, because this is only the first installment in the series). But remember that, when you hear Jesus change your name... or just call it.

You all probably know the story, how Martin Luther King, Jr., wasn’t born with that name. He was *Michael* King, Jr., son of the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Michael King, Sr., in 1934 attended the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Germany and found himself, in a country with a government based in hatred and racism, inspired by the example of native son Martin Luther who – although not exactly exempt from anti-Semitism himself – nevertheless led protest after protest against oppressive Church authority. As the Alliance condemned the Nazis’ anti-Semitism, Rev. King, Sr., adopted the name Martin Luther for himself and his son in place of the name Michael. I’d like to believe that he heard Jesus changing his name, too.

Then, there’s my own story. When I was about four or five and a student at the Eden Lab School, just up the street there, I had grown tired of the Missouri pronunciation of David, which was always sounded something like “DAY-vid,” as if I had two names, “DAY-vid.” I told my parents that I didn’t want them to call me “David” anymore.

“What would you prefer?” Dad asked.

“I don’t know. I guess, just ‘Dave,’” I answered.

“Then, you should tell them so,” Mom said. “And we’ll call you that too... except when we’re angry, and then all bets are off.”

And so it was.

You know, it just seems as though a new name can be the beginning of setting a new environment for ourselves, as if God in transforming us, uses this indicator as a beginning with us. With the name change or a new pronunciation, or maybe just hearing Jesus say our name right, this then becomes the beginning of an environmental reform, one in which we’re more likely to be able to succeed. Maybe it’s because, then, we know we’ve been called properly.

Do you understand?

I began this message by talking about the power of God, about what makes God powerful. And I think, if there’s anything that communicates to us God’s power for us, helping us to succeed in becoming better, surer, more faithful, it must be that – that God knows our

names, or knows by what name to call us.

Is God irresistible? Let's come back to that.

At least for now, let's just acknowledge what God makes possible by knowing us.

Amen.

### PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

*We Lift Our Joys and Concerns*

Elston McCowan, *Student Pastor*

*Prayer of the Day*

Rev. Denoon

*Prayer of Our Savior* (Unison)

**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, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

### WE SHARE OUR GIFTS WITH OTHERS

Joan Musbach

*Invitation*

On this weekend celebrating the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we are reminded of how our faith draws us into the service of others. We invite you to serve and support the purposes of God through this faith community by contributing to our ministries of outreach and care. We have heard God's call, and we know we must respond and enable the responses of others. We do this by giving of our time, talent, and treasure, each according to our own abilities.

If you are able financially, and you would like to support First Church with a monetary donation, please either send a check to

First Congregational Church  
10 West Lockwood Avenue  
Webster Groves, Missouri 63119

or go to our website – [FirstChurchWG.org](http://FirstChurchWG.org) – and to our “Donate” page. Thank you.

*Prayer of Dedication* (Unison)

**To shed your light just as it has shined upon us, O God, we offer these gifts, the fruits of our labors. You have begun a work in us; let it be accomplished: Bless these our gifts so that, nearby and far away, your Church may be bringing your realm into being, in Jesus' name. Amen.**

### ANTHEM

*King for a Day*

Jason Shelton

(Recording by artists of the Association of Unitarian Universalist Musicians)

He had a dream, all the world free of hatred and anger.

He had a dream of a love beyond race, creed or color.

He had a dream, and he gave it to me.

What will I do with it? Who will I be?

I've got to stand up, shout and be heard!

I've got to let my heart guide my words!

I've got to steady my feet and say,

What would it be like if you were King for a day?

He had a dream that all violence would one day be ended. (His dream. Our dream.)

He had a dream that our world torn apart would be mended. (His dream. Our dream.)

He had a dream for you and for me.

What will we do with it? Who will we be?

We've got to stand up, shout and be heard!

We've got to let our heart guide our words!

We've got to steady our feet and say,

“What would it be like if you were King for a day?”

Would you feed those who hunger, refresh those who thirst?

Would you welcome the stranger and comfort the sick?

Would you clothe the naked and set captives free?

Would you work for justice to bring about peace?

Would you hope for the future, unsure what it brings?

Would you have the courage to dream your own dream?

He had a dream that one day we'd be here singing together. (His dream. Our dream.)

He had a dream, and we're making it happen together. (His dream. Our dream.)

He had a dream for you and for me.

What will we do with it? Who will we be?

We've got to stand up, shout and be heard!

We've got to let our heart guide our words!

We've got to steady our feet and say,

“What would it be like if you were King for a day?”

**BENEDICTION**

The Pastors

Pastor Elston: Teach us your way, O God, that we may walk in your truth!

Pastor Merrimon: *Dr. King's life inspires us: "I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land... I still believe that someday we shall overcome."*

**Pastor Dave: We will overcome because of our faith and trust in God. We will reach the goal laid before us without faltering. We will never give up our hope for equality with one another. We will live our dreams into our reality.**

**POSTLUDE**

*Dernier Kyrie (Lord, Have Mercy)*

François Couperin

**DISMISSAL**

Joan Musbach



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*Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.*

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