



# Welcome!

First Congregational Church  
of Webster Groves  
United Church of Christ

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

FEBRUARY 17, 2021  
ASH WEDNESDAY

*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.*

# ASH



# WEDNESDAY

## Order of Worship

WELCOME

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

PRELUDE

“Third Movement (Sarabande)”  
from *Pastorale*

J. S. Bach

CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leader; **People**) from Joel 2

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people.

**Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants at the breast.**

Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her canopy. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of Yahweh, weep.

**Let them say, “Spare your people, O God, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’ ”**

HYMN

*Rebuilding Starts with Weeping*  
(Video)

Amanda Udis-Kessler

Rebuilding starts with weeping, with tears that fall like rain,  
With full and honest grieving for years of loss and pain,  
For suffering and sorrow that never had to be.  
Rebuilding starts with weeping for all who are not free.

Rebuilding starts with loving, with care for every soul,  
With yearning in compassion that all may yet be whole,  
That enemy and neighbor may know a better day.  
Rebuilding starts with loving, for love will show the way

RITUAL OF APPROACH

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Pastor*

*Call to Confession*

God calls us to live humble lives filled with acts of justice and kindness. We know that so often we fall short of that vision. The Good News is that God forgives us and helps us make a fresh start.

We come tonight to confess and to be forgiven. Without the assurance of God’s compassion, we could not face the close examination of Lent, or have the strength to make new beginnings. It is in the assurance of Easter that we are able to make our Lenten journey. Therefore, let us begin...

*Confession of Sin* (Responsive—Leader; **People**)

Adapted from Psalm 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

**Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.**

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

**Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.**

*Silence for Reflection and Confession*

*Words of Assurance* (Responsive—Leader; **People**) Psalm 51 (continuing)

Create in us clean hearts, O God, and put new and right spirits within us.

**Restore to us the joy of your salvation, and sustain in us willing spirits.**

Purge us, and we shall be clean; wash us, and we shall be purer than snow.

**O God of our salvation, our tongues will sing aloud of your deliverance.**

**THE WORD SHARED**

*From the Prophets*

Isaiah 58:1-12

Halley Kim, *Pastoral Assistant*  
New Revised Standard Version, ad.

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet day after day they seek me

and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness

and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgments,

they delight to draw near to God.

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,

and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight

and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today

will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose,

a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,

and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,

a day acceptable to your God?

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you,

the glory of the holy One shall be your rear guard.

Then you shall call, and your God will answer;

you shall cry for help, and God will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,

the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

if you offer your food to the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

then your light shall rise in the darkness

and your gloom be like the noonday.  
Your God will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.  
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.

*From the Epistles*

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Rev. Boyd

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake God made one to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance — in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

**MESSAGE**

*“Weapons of Righteousness? Really?”*

Rev. Denoon

Y’know, there are times when I’m reading the letters attributed to Peter when I just lose it. And I have to confess to you (Pastor Merrimon did say, moments ago, that this is a time for confession, so here’s mine!), one of those times when I’ve lost it was when I was preparing for this service and ran across the phrase, “weapons of righteousness.” It sent me musing, and maybe a little amusing, about what I ought to say to you.

You know me. Or, rather, if you’ve ever been with me on a Sunday morning you know me. I’m anti-violence and, opposed to the culture of guns, opposed to the death penalty, bent on exposing the abuses of our society against people who are just trying to live their lives and make it to tomorrow.

So, when an evangelist, like the one who wrote First Peter, whoever that may have been (but it wasn’t Peter), whenever someone like that writes about “the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left,” I just have to wonder what that person must have been thinking.

I wonder the same thing about my friends who refer to themselves as “prayer warriors.” I don’t really think that warfare – literal, metaphorical, or spiritual – has any place in Christian practices. So, to be a warrior of any kind is not a religious identifier I understand.

I mean, look at how much trouble it’s gotten the Muslims into. They have the Arabic word, *jihad*, to contend with now. It used to mean a personal, inner, spiritual struggle to be a faithful person, and some loonies got a hold of it and decided it meant “holy war,” and now much of White America thinks that there’s some kind of organized Islamic effort to dislodge Christian hegemony from the American landscape! (Not that I think Christian hegemony is a good thing, I just don’t think anybody is seriously

organizing against it.)

I'm sorry, but I have interacted and befriended many Islamic people, and our familiar term "organized religion" is more for them an oxymoron than it possibly is for any other religious group. They have no official clergy, no centralized organization, their entire ethic is aimed at the individual... No, there's no way they're taking over!

We had our own fair share of holy wars in Christian history, mostly against rulers and governments that claimed Islam as their religion of choice. They were pointless, misguided, and cruel, really having nothing to do with our religion. Religion was simply a justification for barbarity.

Furthermore, the earliest writings that we put to pen about ourselves tended to make us out as victims. If those ancient accounts are to be believed at all, weapons were far more likely to be used against us than they were to be used *by us!* This makes all the more ironic statements like this one of the author of First Peter. Paul and people who wrote in his name were just as bad or worse – "the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God" comes to mind, in Ephesians. Granted, most of Paul's references were to armor... rather different than referring to weapons.

But I suppose, Matthew claims that Jesus said, "I come not to bring peace but a sword," setting families against each other. But he also said, "Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword." So, you can be pretty certain that the dividing sword he claimed to bring was metaphorical.

Maybe I'm missing the metaphorical point of apostles inviting their readers to adopt a warlike attitude about righteousness and faithfulness... "Weapons of righteousness" aren't going to kill anyone, after all. But the imagery is all off, isn't it? Tradition says that eleven of the twelve apostles experienced violent deaths. Judas Iscariot, who was a disciple and an apostle until he betrayed Jesus, Matthew says died by suicide; Luke claims that he experienced some sort of spontaneous self-explosion. Only John, and the women who traveled with Jesus and later became apostles in their own right, at least according to my memory, escaped the lynchings and executions of the Twelve, Jesus' brother James, and Paul.

I read in one history book that we wouldn't even use the cross or crucifix as a symbol of faith until late into the second century, if not later. So, "weapons of righteousness"? We couldn't have come up with a better metaphor?

I don't know. Maybe this works for you. I certainly don't want to disrespect anyone by confessing my caution, you know?

That's kind of become my own personal fast, over the last few years: trying to find language more befitting my religious understanding and attitude. I'm in tune with struggle or challenge or difficulty, when it comes to my attempts to be as selfless as I can be; I'm unenthusiastic about imagery of violence.

I've also tried to put some distance between myself and monetary adjectives about other people. I try not to say that someone is "worthy" or "valuable," "precious" or "priceless," because of those words' associations with money, as if we can place value on human life. These I fast. People are not commodities... or they shouldn't be.

Instead, I have committed my focus to people's dignity, brilliance, vitality, effort, perseverance. These may be less metaphorical than language of worth, but I hope you can understand why I consider the concentration on monetary associations to be so questionable and even unhelpful.

This is the point at which I wonder with you about what sort of fast you might be willing to take on, this Lent – whether actual or metaphorical. (Say, if you're going to engage in serious not-eating, would you do me a favor and check with your doctor about how to do it as safely as possible? We don't need any more complications added to this pandemic.)

One of us coming to you today has foresworn candy, for this Lent. Just remember, whatever you're setting aside, one thing for you to do as you do, is to think about whether this might be a permanent change you could make. You know, if you're doing it for forty days, why not more? If it's good for you, I mean... if it brings you somehow closer to God.

Because that's what the fasting is for, isn't it – to develop more fully within ourselves a sense of *where God is* or *where we might be best attuned to look for God*. We can feel dislocated, unsettled, loose,

and we need that Reality, don't we, that sense of a Person or a Presence alongside and within us... if not assuring us of meaning, at least embracing us in the midst of our insecurity. People can do this for us, too, but human life is transitory, and having One who is permanent, eternal, is our advantage as religious people.

We can't smudge this stuff on each other's foreheads and not break social distancing guidelines that we're supposed to follow. So, the fast we keep will be all the more significant, this Lent. "Blow the trumpet, sound the alarm," our forty days are here.

Amen.

**ANTHEM**

*The Fast that Love Has Chosen*  
(Video)

Amanda Udis-Kessler

Fast from fear and feast on love. Fast from violence, feast on peace.  
Fast from hatred, feast on care. Fast from terror, feast on hope.  
Fast from envy, feast on joy. Fast from judgment, feast on compassion.  
Fast from despair and feast on trust. Fast from anxiety, feast on wonder.

*Refrain:*

This is the fast that Love has chosen: for us to bring the day of justice,  
For us to free the ones in chains, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked,  
To offer shelter to the homeless, to tend the sick and those in pain,  
To welcome the lonely, lost, and least. This is our fast. This is our feast.

Fast from cruelty, feast on kindness. Fast from revenge and feast on forgiveness.  
Fast from controlling, feast on patience. Fast from complacency, feast on justice.  
Fast from aloneness, feast on connection. Fast from shame and feast on delight.  
Fast from selfishness, feast on giving. Fast from defensiveness, feast on welcoming.

*Refrain.*

Fast from resentment, feast on tenderness. Fast from arrogance, feast on humility.  
Fast from worry, feast on playfulness. Fast from busyness, feast on rest.  
Fast from bleakness, feast on beauty. Fast from chaos, feast on silence.  
Fast from violence, feast on peace. Fast from fear and feast on love.

**RITUAL FOR VIRTUAL COMMUNION**

Rev. Denoon

*Story of the Last Supper*

The story of Jesus' Last Supper was not an isolated incident. In fact, there were many suppers. The supper at Levi's house was one of them, at Zacchaeus, with Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and the list goes on and on.

The distinctive quality of these meals was the guests. All were welcome, whatever their walk of life or spiritual journey. Jesus turned no one away.

Therefore, all should be welcome at our table when we remember Christ's presence, as he was at so many others.

But on one particular night, that night when he was betrayed, as he took a loaf of bread and blessed and broke it, as ever the host he was, Jesus said, "Take and eat of this, everyone. For this is me, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Next, he took some wine, and poured it into a cup for all of them to share, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this: as often as you drink it, remember me."

And so, remembering his powerful acts in these simple signs, we do now as he did then: sharing, keeping such feasts until he comes, and all whom we love may sit together at Christ's holy table.

*Prayer of Thanksgiving*

Blessed are you, O God, for you give us of the earth to eat and drink – bread for strength and the fruit of the vine to share a spirit. And so you have, through ages of ages, by your ceaseless creativity given evidence in scripture, science, and our lives in you: out of your abundance you established the earth and those who love you with justice or the promise of it.

Through prophets and apostles, everyday people and extraordinary ones, all of us students of yours and all of us family, you call us into a new and transforming existence by your will and your word. Be mindful of us and of those for whom we pray as silently we offer you our hearts.

*Silent prayer.*

*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. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

*Consecrating the Elements*

Now, bless by your Holy Spirit all our gifts of bread and cup that through them we may be strengthened, lightened, made new, and become one as Christ was one with you.

*Sharing the Elements*

*Partaking of Bread and Cup*

*Signs of Peace*

*Consecrating Ourselves (Unison)*

**Sovereign Jesus Christ, you have put your life into our hands; now we put our lives into yours. Take us, renew and remake us. What we have been is past; what we shall be, through you, still awaits. Lead us on. Take us with you. Amen.**

**BENEDICTION**

*O Divine Healer: Benediction*  
(Video)

G. Brown-Daniel

**POSTLUDE**

“Through the Moanin’ Pines”  
from *From the Southland*

H. T. Burleigh



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

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