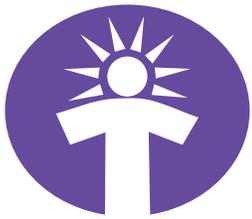


# Welcome!

First Congregational Church  
of Webster Groves United Church of Christ



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

March 14, 2021

Fourth Sunday In Lent

"One Great Hour Of Sharing" Special Offering

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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.*

## Order of Worship

### PRELUDE

*Strum*

Jessie Montgomery

The Amati Quartet

Ava Andres, violin; Bradley Smith, violin; Jay Lipsutz, viola; Natalie Van Winkle, cello

### WELCOME

Michael Lenard, *Announcer*

Hello and welcome to worship with the First Congregational Church of Webster Groves. We are a member church of the United Church of Christ, located near St. Louis, Missouri. This is our worship for Sunday, March fourteenth, 2021. Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent, and the day we mark our One Great Hour of Sharing. This is our day to benefit the work of Church World Service. I'll tell you more about that later.

Our worship begins with the tolling of the bell and lighting of the candles.

### TOLLING OF THE BELL

### LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES

### CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leader; People)

The Student Pastors

In caring and compassion, God holds us when we are weak.

**With ideas and inspiration, God pushes us to grow and thrive.**

With divine generosity, God shares all creation with us.

**God calls us as partners to build a world of joy and hope.**

Let us join our hearts, hands, and voices with people the world over in praise, thanksgiving, and commitment to our one, our wondrous, God.

### RAISING THE COVENANT

*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

*My Song Is Love Unknown*

Samuel Crossman

My song is love unknown, my Savior's love to me,  
Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.  
O who am I that for my sake  
My God should take frail flesh and die? ...

God left the richest throne salvation to bestow;  
But Christ as flesh and bone the world refused to know.  
But, O my Friend, my Friend indeed,  
Who at my need did life expend! ...

I sing my plain belief one song my heart outpours:  
Never was pain nor grief, never was love like yours.  
This is my Friend, in whose sweet praise  
I all my days could gladly spend. ...

### RITUAL OF APPROACH

*Prayer of Confession* (Responsive)

Rev. Elston McCowan, *Student Pastor*

Jesus, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.

**But only say the word, and your servant will be healed.**

Let us confess our sins.

*Corporate Confession*

If we have been singing praises with our voices and kept the joy out of our hearts;

**Have mercy on us.**

If we have prayed only for what was possible and hoped only for what we could see;

**Have mercy on us.**

If we have prayed for the Holy Spirit to come among us and not expected the Spirit to change our lives;

**Have mercy on us.**

Have mercy on us, O God, for we know your love is sure and strong even when ours is not. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Silence for Personal Confessions*

*Assurance of Pardon*

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

“My Spirit is upon you,” says the Lord.

**In God’s mercy, we are forgiven.**

Rest in God’s reassuring embrace, and receive the sweetness of life renewed.

**NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY**

Halley Kim, *Pastoral Assistant*

**THE WORD SHARED**

Rev. Merrimon Boyd, *Student Pastor*

*From the Law*

Numbers 21:4-9

The Schocken Bible

This reading is from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of the fourth book of the Torah. Though in English we call the book “Numbers,” in Hebrew its name means “In the wilderness,” and that is the setting for this episode. This rendering of the text is from a translation by the Jewish scholar Everett Fox, who created his translation in order to more strongly reflect the feeling of the original Hebrew. Therefore Moses is called by his Hebrew name *Moshe* (pronounced: MOE-sha). The story begins as the people of Israel — who have journeyed for forty years through the wilderness of Sinai — are approaching the promised land. There is one last test in store.

[The Israelites] marched from Hill’s Hill by the Reed Sea Road, to go-around the land of Edom, and the people (became) short-tempered on the way.

The people spoke against God and against Moshe: “Why did you bring us up from Egypt? to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our throats loathe the despicable food!”

So Yahweh sent upon the people burning-snakes; they bit the people, and there died many people of Israel.

The people came to Moshe and said: “We have sinned! For we have spoken against Yahweh and against you. Intercede to God, so that he may remove from us the burning-snakes!”

So Moshe interceded on behalf of the people.

And Yahweh said to Moshe: “Make yourself a burning-snake and put it on a banner-pole; it shall be, whoever has been bitten and then sees it, will live.”

So Moshe made one out of copper, and he put it on a banner-pole, and it was: if a burning-snake bit someone and they looked upon the burning-snake made of copper, they would live.

*From the Gospels*

John 3:14-21

The Inclusive Bible

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,  
so the Chosen One must be lifted up,  
so that everyone who believes in the Chosen One might have eternal life.

Yes, God so loved the world  
as to give the Only Begotten One,  
that whoever believes may not die,  
but have eternal life.

God sent the Only Begotten into the world  
not to condemn the world,  
but that through the Only Begotten  
the world might be saved.

Whoever believes in the Only Begotten avoids judgment,  
but whoever doesn’t believe is judged already for not believing in the name  
of the Only Begotten of God.

On these grounds is the sentence pronounced:  
that though the light came into the world,  
people showed they preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil.  
Indeed, people who do wrong hate the light and avoid it,  
for fear their actions will be exposed;  
but people who live by the truth  
come out into the light,  
so that it may be plainly seen  
that what they do is done in God.

*Response.*

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

**Thanks be to God.**

**ANTHEM**

*Hell Is a Human Invention*  
Halley Kim, soloist

Amanda Udis-Kessler

You hear them preach it, all over this town:  
Where you will land when you die.  
Some will go up, and most will go down;  
So much for the sweet by-and-by!  
But I won't be taken by claims I'm forsaken  
For sins too outrageous to mention.  
Not that I'm pure, but of this I'm sure:  
Hell is a human invention.

Have you been sleepless with worry and fear  
Pondering brimstone and flames?  
Have you felt guilty without knowing why?  
Open your eyes, and say your goodbyes  
To history's cruelest contention.  
Social control's not good for your soul  
And hell is a human invention.

Hell? No! There is no hell  
Except for the cruelty, the greed  
And the fear we create for ourselves!  
And so, we bid farewell to the myth  
That has served us so poorly that we must dispel.

You hear them preach it all over the earth.  
Go now and preach what you know:  
Humans are beings of infinite worth.  
No torture is waiting below.  
Our work lies ahead, and it's not when we're dead,  
So cancel that misapprehension.  
End violence and war, share wealth with the poor, and then you'll be sure:  
Love is creation's intention,  
And hell is a human invention.

**MESSAGE OF THE DAY**

Rev. Denoon

A researcher at the University of British Columbia by the name of Azim Shariff is one of the authors of an article, *The Belief in God: Why People Believe and Why They Do Not*, which appeared in 2018 edition of *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. I heard him interviewed on an episode of NPR's podcast, "Hidden Brain," back in 2018 when news of his research was just coming to light in the press and in academia.

Prof. Shariff and his colleagues observe that the rise of religion came with the rise of civilization, and that the reason why religion really took off then was that, as trade developed, it was in your best interest as a trader to share the same values with other traders. As a customer, it was best to share the same beliefs as your merchants. Because a common religion provides its adherents with a common set of rules about how to conduct yourself in society.

Moreover, when the big Western religions appeared on the scene – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – the one God intimately connected to you and therefore both fearsome and embracing made it so that, even if you were not interacting with another person, your personal actions would still be directed toward a common norm; your behaviors would be similar with your spiritual siblings. Muslims would be praying five times a day and avoiding intoxication. Christians would be worshiping on Sunday and regularly reminded of their oneness in, with, and as the Body of Christ. Jews would keep kosher and pray morning and night, and observe the Sabbath – they and all their households – enjoying 24 hours off from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday.

There are rhythms to religions that all of their adherents share and which make their societies predictable. I have no doubt that this is why it is so important for some Christians to assert that we are a Christian nation, despite a profound amount of evidence to the contrary!

There are common rewards and punishments. All the big three Western religions have some doctrine of heaven and hell. This is how, even if you don't get your comeuppance while you walk the earth, you can be assured that you'll get it when you no longer do. Thus, everyone abides the rhythms and everyone follows the rules. These were healthy practices. These made their practitioners better.

So, I'm ruminating on Professor Shariff's work and explanation of all this, and *these readings* come up before me (from Numbers and John) – especially that bizarre story of the Israelites and the burning-snakes. Because, I'll tell you something, they're not snakes at all that are biting the Israelites. They're mythical beasts kind of like dragons, called seraphs or seraphim. And what Moshe affixes to that post in the story, there "In the Wilderness," is not a bronze or copper serpent, it's a shiny metal seraph. That's why, when people are bitten by the "snakes" they get better when they look at the pole. If you get bit by a *mythical* being that you maybe neglected just prior to it biting you, *why shouldn't it be* that when you actually see a representation of one, you would get better! (Makes perfect sense, right?)

Oh, and then John says, by the way, *Jesus on the cross is like that!*

The images from those readings make me want to pick up something like what Prof. Shariff was setting down, the idea that there is another reality underlying this one, or at least that this reality is more than the sum of its evident parts. Because we blessedly benefit from understanding that this is the case. There is something blessedly useful in believing that Someone supernatural is taking note of you – lovingly, or suspiciously; supportively, or doubting your motives... though I'm hoping you'll be inclined to the "loving" and "supportive" examples.

This is like what I've told you about my friend who was contemplating joining AA but who first wanted to know whether she could be her own Higher Power. You know, you can't be; it rather defeats the purpose, doesn't it. And even if we're not addicted to some substance, that doesn't mean we don't benefit from relying on a Higher Power to help us move beyond ways that make us unhealthy and motivate us into new patterns of health.

For example: There are some of you who believe in miracles. Some who believe in angels. And practically all of us recognize that there is something disgustingly other-worldly about evil in and among us. You may believe, like Sartre, that "Hell is other people;" or like Udis-Kessler in that song that Halley sang a moment ago, that "Hell is a human invention;" or that hell is a genuine, underlying reality that occasionally seeps into our existence. But there will be almost no one who seriously says that they do not understand how hell is something that affects us.

And heaven too.

That's what I mean. We need *that*. We need to internalize *that*. In our case, in Christianity, we insist that love – that ineffable but generally understood benefit and grace – needs to rule us. It underlies us. It permeates our existence. It completes us. And we need to keep ourselves aware of it.

Furthermore, there is something in our nature that prompts us to understand reward and punishment, right and wrong, good and evil. Sometimes, we'll pay attention to it and try to do something to preserve good and wipe out evil. Sometimes, we'll avoid the hard work and let things remain unjust because doing otherwise is simply inconvenient.

And then, there come years like this past year (and yes, this is our 53<sup>rd</sup> Sunday away from the sanctuary). Times like these, we will be so confronted with ourselves and what's wrong in our society, our culture, that we *know, we know!* that we just *have to act* to make things better. That underlying reality, that more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts quality of our existence... the voice of God, the urging of the Holy Spirit... prompt us!

COVID 19, for the last year, has brought us to a new place where we can feel ourselves, our society, more than ever ready to get better, ready to heal, ready, ready to embrace the meaning of that so-central concept in our religion, SALVE-ation... to have applied to us – our heart, our beings – a spiritual salve that will make us as persons, as people... get better!

Don't you want to get better? Don't you want us all to get better? Doesn't this relative quarantine and isolation, but certainly at least the social distance tell you?

We'd all been sharing in common quarantine and isolation and social distance for a long time by May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, when George Floyd's life was ended by police officers pinning that mighty man to the ground. And this common experience elicited reflection and response in our privileged classes such as they had not done before. Our televisions and computer monitors and tablets and phone screens became enabled, as mirrors reflecting a broader perspective.

There was a synchronicity of attention, then, to Breonna Taylor's death, coming at the same time into the Louisville courts. Her death was so similar to the death of Atatiana Jefferson who died innocently in another hail of bullets when police raided her home just five months before, that I actually for a couple of days assumed that they were the same person, and I'd just misheard the name.

It was the end of May, the beginning of June. Do you remember? Do you remember how it felt? Of course you do, because we all were feeling it. You were there with me. Well, not *there*, but, yes, **THERE!**

Suddenly, as they hadn't done before, White people began turning out in droves, demanding police reform and reallocation of public funds away from law enforcement to social programs which could send psych- and social experts into the field... and end drug raids and police home invasions.

Do you remember that? Didn't it feel like things might be on their way to getting better?

What religious and non-religious people alike – Black, White, Asian – what we recognized from our isolated places that launched us into a common experience, was that a lot of what we were seeing prior to that historical moment had been a broad social allowance (even tolerance) for evil. Whether our cosmologies indicated the existence of a place of punishment in the hereafter, or we acknowledged that human evil has a tendency to perpetuate itself “unto the third and fourth generation,” there was a general – if sometimes unspoken – realization that hell was breaking loose for some genuinely innocent people... had been for some time. And somebody had to do something about it. *This time*, WE had to do something about it.

Many marched. I joined a couple of rallies with my wife. I saw many of you at them, too, and I know that you've attended others. Pastor Elston and his family took Pastor Merrimon along with them as the NAACP “Blacked the Vote”!

But there's still more to do. Still much more. This, like the way any social crisis must be addressed, cannot be a temporary thing. We will grow weary, but there will still be more to do. It took 450 years to get us here in this state of being, and I don't doubt that it will take a long time to get us out of it, requiring much spirit and energy.

So what else can we do? What else?

My reply last summer was that we ought to answer evil with compassion, and many of you agreed with me. And I will honestly tell you with embarrassment that, for as much as I have continued to receive email from Sister Carla Mae Streeter and the Compassionate St. Louis initiative, I have not attended a single one of their meetings since my sermon series on Christianity and compassion, almost a year ago, or generally publicized their meetings to you so that you might go. And OK, Compassionate St. Louis may not be a panacea, but it is at least an effort.

We might also have taken more seriously the invitation of Metropolitan Congregations United to take faith-filled action with them against the power of hell and oppression in our society. In January 2020 they came and expressed their invitation, and proud as I am of our members who formed a Social Justice task force in reply, our general response has been hardly overwhelming.

But don't you feel that divine tug? Aren't you looking toward that post with its supernatural occupant designed to get us better? Mustn't we counteract evil with goodness and righteousness and justice?

Prof. Shariff's work tells us that values held in common, understandings held in common, love and justice held in common... these are the things that make give potency to religion and make it blessedly fruitful.

Practically every last Christian, even if they don't memorize that part about the healing effect of Jesus on the cross being like that mythical beast on a pole, *has memorize the next line*, about God loving the world so much as to send a part of Godself to live and dwell and die among us for the sake of the world's salve-ation.

I have to believe we can do this. Because there is a Higher Power to whom we can turn. This existence is far more than its evident parts. There is a reality underlying this one drawing us into love, justice, and righteousness.

Amen.

## **INTERLUDE**

*Lenten Acclamation*  
*Canterbury Bells*

Kenneth T. Kosche

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

*Joys and Concerns*

Rev. McCowan

*Prayer of the Day*

Rev. Denoon

(a prayer of the Rev. Kendall Nordstrom, Wisconsin Conference, UCC)

O Lover of the world, we thank you for all the gifts you give us, but especially for the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ who has been lifted up for the healing of the world.

We thank you for the light which comes from him so that we can clearly see how to live in your will. Even as Jesus was sent to save so he sends us to do what is true. In that spirit we lift up to you now our joys and concerns.

We pray for your church that we may be light for a sin-shadowed world. We pray for those in positions of authority that they may see themselves as ones who are sent to serve. We pray for our world that it may be healed of all that hurts and destroys life. We pray for this church, our mission and programs, that our hearts may be filled with the love of Christ which is light and life for all of creation.

Hold before those who need healing of body, mind, and spirit your presence, that in your presence we might find the gift of saving... salving faith.

We ask these things, O God, knowing that our need is as great as those for whom we pray. So judge and answer our prayers, not because we are worthy, but because you are the One who saves, through the name of Jesus our Sovereign in whom we believe so much that we are prompted to pray as he taught us to,

*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 BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS**

Michael Lenard

*Invitation*

By combining our gifts, skills, and abilities, we are enabled to do much together through our church. If you would like to make a financial offering to First Church, I hope you will consider an additional offering for One Great Hour of Sharing. One Great Hour of Sharing is our springtime denominational collection for Church World Service, the service arm of the World Council of Churches. As you present your gifts to First Church, I encourage you also to consider a generous donation to One Great Hour of Sharing. You can find more information about the special offering in the March edition of our newsletter, *Covenant News*, and in our weekly eNews.

While the health crisis continues, until it is safe again to pass plates or collect in person, we will be receiving monetary offerings only by mail or online. 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, led by Michael)

**We offer these gifts, O God of all people, in the hope and trust that you will use them to bring healing and hope where there is need. Where natural disaster has befallen, may these gifts help build new life. Where refugees seek safety from violence and fear, may these gifts enable caring and welcoming hearts and hands. Where hatred sullies your hope for your human family, may our gifts be a sign and instrument of reconciliation. Thank you, God, for the privilege of this offering. May it indeed do more than we can imagine! Amen.**

**BENEDICTION**

Rev. Denoon

**POSTLUDE**

*Quartet in G Major (Opus 76, No. 1)*  
*Allegro con spirito*  
The Amati Quartet

Joseph Haydn

**DISMISSAL**

Michael Lenard

That is our worship for this week at First Church. We are glad you could worship with us. Please, join us for our Virtual Coffee Fellowship, Sunday at 11 am on Zoom. The Virtual Coffee Fellowship link is on the homepage of our website.

Please, also plan to be with us this Wednesday at 7 o'clock in the evening, when we gather for our weekly Lenten series, “*Webster Groves and African America*.” This week’s topic is, *Developing Dialogue, 1993 through 2017*. Join us as we consider the work and witness of our church in our lifetimes and recent memory.

This coming Saturday, March twentieth, don’t miss our second installment of *Journey through Creation*. Watch your email for registration information.

Next Sunday, March twenty-first, we will mark the fifth Sunday in Lent. That afternoon, we will gather at safe distances in our east parking lot for a filming of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. This video will be used at the start of our Palm Sunday worship service.

As for now, our worship has ended, let our service begin.



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

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