



**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL**  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
235 South Kenilworth Avenue, Elmhurst, IL  
*Partners in Christ's Service since 1890*

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT  
At Home or Small Group Worship  
February 21, 2021

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**OPENING HYMN** – *audio available on the church website*

Mitchell Kinn, vocals  
Dave Benziger, guitar

#506 Healer of Our Ev'ry Ill

Refrain:  
Healer of our every ill,  
light of each tomorrow,  
give us peace beyond our fear,  
and hope beyond our sorrow.

You who know our fears and sadness,  
grace us with your peace and gladness;  
Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. [Refrain]

Give us strength to love each other,  
every sister, every brother;  
Spirit of all kindness, be our guide. [Refrain]

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

God's grace and forgiveness helps me move forward.

**God is the stronghold of my life.**

In the shelter of God's unfailing love, I confess my sins and seek to correct my transgressions.

**Teach us your way and show us your path.**

We shall see the blessing of God come this Lenten journey.

## **OPENING PRAYER**

Gracious God, in every season and circumstance, we need your sustaining word. By the power of your Holy Spirit, proclaim the good news among us today so that we may repent and believe and see anew how the time is fulfilled and the kingdom has come near. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

## **GLORIA PATRI**

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son  
And to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning  
Is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, amen.

## **PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH**

Prayer Hymn #263

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place,  
I can feel his mighty power and his grace;  
I can hear the brush of angels' wings,  
I see glory on each face;  
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

Silent Prayer

**PASTORAL PRAYER** – *audio available on the church website*

Rev. Mike Daly

Gracious God, we seek to feel your presence and know your Spirit as we begin our Lenten journey and move closer to the cross. We pray that you would minister to us in our personal wilderness the same way you ministered to Jesus in his times of testing and trial.

Lent is a time for repentance, accountability, and preparation. It is also a time of discovery. As you strengthened Jesus, loving God send your Spirit upon us to strengthen our courage, clarify your vision for us, and help us make the right choices. Help us to recognize and turn away from those forces that lead us away from abundant life with you.

Lord, hear our prayers of joy and concern for the decrease in coronavirus cases and for all those still inflicted and struggling. Bring comfort, healing, and hope to all who are ill, injured, or hurting. Turn our paralyzing fears into a compassionate response to assist in whatever ways are possible.

God of Strength, when we follow the crowd, instead of seeking your wisdom, grant us your grace to be more faithful. If we are quick to judge others without first looking at ourselves, grant us your grace to be more humble. When we respond to human need and suffering with apathy, injustice, or indifference, set us straight. When we waste resources and pollute this world, force us to do better. When our love of worldly goods and comforts blind us from the needs of others and keeps us from loving you more fully, forgive us with your mercy and help us to refocus our priorities.

Eternal God, be with us on our Lenten journey. Heal our pain, remove our doubt, forgive our failures, and help us to accept and be changed by your love and forgiveness. We lift these prayers in confidence that they will be heard. In the name of your Son, our Savior, Jesus. Amen.

**OUR LORD’S PRAYER** – *audio available on the website*      Michelle Maiers, vocals

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.

**CHILDREN’S MESSAGE** – *audio available on the church website*      Martha Mendoza

**SCRIPTURE** – *audio available on the church website*      Fritz Baumgartner

Psalm 25: 1-10 (NIV)

In you, LORD my God,  
I put my trust.  
I trust in you;  
do not let me be put to shame,  
nor let my enemies triumph over me.  
No one who hopes in you  
will ever be put to shame,  
but shame will come on those  
who are treacherous without cause.  
Show me your ways, LORD,  
teach me your paths.  
Guide me in your truth and teach me,

for you are God my Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long.  
Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love,  
for they are from of old.  
Do not remember the sins of my youth  
and my rebellious ways;  
according to your love remember me,  
for you, LORD, are good.  
Good and upright is the LORD;  
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.  
He guides the humble in what is right  
and teaches them his way.  
All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful  
toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.

**SERMON** – *audio available on the church website*

Rev. Mike Daly

## The Lenten Journey Ahead

I will begin with a quote from C.S. Lewis, who wrote, “God knows our situation; He will not judge us as if we had no difficulties to overcome. What matters is the sincerity and perseverance of our will to overcome them. Life with God is not immunity from difficulties, but peace in difficulties.”

As we entered Lent on Ash Wednesday, we entered the wilderness, like Jesus, to prepare for Easter. Jesus is one who knows what difficulties are. We are asked to follow.

The Gospel of Mark (Mark 1: 9-15) offers very little detail about Jesus in the wilderness. Mark gives us only two sentences about Jesus’ time there. We learn that Jesus was tested by Satan, encountered wild beasts, and that angels waited on him. It’s not much information to go by if you are looking for a roadmap for your Lenten journey. But we have plenty of other sources that will be a fantastic guide.

The twenty-fifth psalm does give clues of what to expect in the weeks to come. The psalmist pleads with God for a guiding hand to the paths of righteousness - recalling the Exodus story, when God led the People of Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness. They were guided with pillars of cloud and fire, and sustained with morning manna. In their wilderness journey, you might recall, the people of Israel didn’t head directly to their destination. The wilderness experience had too much to teach them to rush through it.

Out there, they formed a new identity, grew closer to God, and received the gift of the Torah (God's law). In this liminal space, they made plenty of mistakes along the way and had lots of setbacks. But they grew in faith.

They were taught on the paths of life for forty years in that wilderness. They were trained with trials and tribulations, testing and teaching before entering the Promised Land. Now it is our turn to learn about the paths of righteousness in the wilderness of this Lenten season.

In this space, we can expect to learn something about ourselves by overcoming obstacles that so often seem like enemies. Obstacles are those things that block or hinder our progress; perhaps like those wild beasts Jesus experienced. Obstacles are found outside of ourselves and within. They make us distracted and disoriented. And as we know, most often, the real danger lies within us.

Even when we easily identify those things that hinder or block us, they still cause us to forget something of our true identity. Any obstacle, or enemy, or temptation can lead us to behave in ways that are less than we were created to be. When we encounter situations that are vengeful or mean, we become afraid or depressed. In being unsure of our identity, we might be inclined to addictive or other self-destructive behavior. You know how that is. The more lost you are, the more likely you are to get even “more lost.”

Like Jesus, the psalmist teaches us that it is good to get help from and rely on God and each other. Don't give the power your enemies or your fears seem to demand. How? Rev. Geoffrey Hoare suggests, ‘If you haven't chosen a Lenten discipline yet, perhaps you should consider *naming and then praying* for your enemies each day, paying particular attention to the enemies that you find within yourself and the temptations you face outside...’

During Lent, we pay attention to those other things of our life that we would rather ignore. But it is about more than paying attention. Lent reminds us to examine our actions and how we put faith into action. Lenten practices, of any kind, open better pathways of faithful discipleship and discipline.

There is a Greek word *askesis* that means "severe discipline for a season." Something ancient monks would have practiced. That might be fine for some people, but that is definitely not for everyone. However, the root of *askesis* also means "to exercise" and is often used in the context of shadow-boxing. Not a bad image for us to adopt during Lent. Life is full of strange shadows, but we take them on. We are called to

spar with and overcome the shadow side to release those parts of our life that cry out for light.

Ask yourself questions. What areas compromise your freedom and weaken your ability to be closer with God and more concerned about others?

The psalmist is quick to ask for God's help in this project, and so can we.

Show me your ways, LORD,  
teach me your paths.  
Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are God my Savior,  
and my hope is in you all day long.  
Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love,  
for they are from of old.  
Do not remember the sins of my youth  
and my rebellious ways.

The psalmist says not to expect pathways paved smooth with gold. But the wilderness offers more than just trial and testing. It offers opportunities for self-examination and repentance. Even when the paths are smooth, we still must say, I trust in you LORD; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies (my obstacles, my distractions, my frustrations) triumph over me. If nothing else, remember this one thing. *God loves you, and there is nothing you can do about it!*

When we pay close attention to what is happening in our hearts, we remember that we are not God, but we are God's. We belong to God. That is our true identity. And so we practice, until God's love is engrained into us. We are called to attitudes of humility, spirits of generosity, and ever-seeking compassionate hearts to bring peace and comfort to others.

We confess that we are not God. We proclaim, we are God's and God's alone. When we mean this confession, we are raised to a new life.

In the weeks to come on your Lenten journey, remember that the wilderness is not a place of danger. It is our safe place to be closer to Jesus, ourselves, and our faith. It is a place of preparation. There are paths to proclaim and sing of our steadfast love and faithfulness to God. They are paths leading us to better relationships with each other, ourselves, and God. Even if the barriers and obstacles of life seem too numerous to overcome.

The people of Israel prepared in their wilderness journey for the Promised Land. Jesus prepared in his wilderness journey for his public ministry but also for Easter glory. Our Lenten journeys prepare us for renewal and a closer relationship to God.

Blessings to you on your Lenten journey. Remember, whatever your path this Lenten season, it will lead you closer to God and to Easter Joy!

Amen.

**OFFERTORY** – *audio available on the church website*

I Feel the Spirit Moving  
*Kevin Loeper, vocals*

*By doing acts of justice and compassion and by sharing our resources,  
we bear witness to the good news of the gospel.  
Our offerings are received with gratitude to God.*

## **DOXOLOGY**

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise him, all creatures here below;  
Praise him above, ye heavenly host:  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

## **OFFERTORY PRAYER**

Gracious God, accept our gifts – of time, talent, and treasure - as evidence of our desire to participate with you in the care of your beloved creation. These gifts symbolize our thanksgiving for all that you provide. Through these gifts, we praise you. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

**CLOSING SONG** – *audio available on the church website*

His Eye Is on the Sparrow  
*Dave Benziger, guitar*

## **BENEDICTION**

Go forth and be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the afflicted. Honor all people. Love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you, amen.