

Worship for February 18, 2024  
First Sunday in Lent

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

Lenten Reading     Nancy Jackson and Melvin Richardson

**Reader 1:** Brothers and sisters in Christ, I invite you to observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer and fasting, by self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God's Word.

Lent is a period of forty days- like Moses' sojourn at Mt. Sinai, Elijah's journey to Mt. Horeb, Jonah's call to Ninevah, and of Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness. Like the story of Noah and the flood.

**Reader 2:** In Genesis 9:8-17 we read: Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "I now establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you- the birds, the livestock, and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you- every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you, never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood, and never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, a covenant for all generations to come. I have set my rainbow in the clouds and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and all the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all the living creatures of all kinds. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth."

Prayer

**Merciful God, in Christ you make all things new. Transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory, through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

\*Hymn 12    Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise

Prayer of Confession

**O God, our strength and fortress, forgive us when we fail to trust in you.  
We fall easily to temptation,**

**swayed by false words,  
and false statements of our own making.  
We choose ease and comfort over the claims made upon us  
as Christians devoted in faith and service.  
In turning from you, we settle for less than the abundant life you intend.  
We keep the Good News to ourselves and neglect to demonstrate your generosity to those  
desperate to find relief.  
Forgive us, Lord, and do not put us to shame.  
Show us your salvation when we call upon you.  
In the name of Jesus Christ, who died that we might live. Amen.**

\*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

The Lord is generous to all who call on him.

God does not turn us away, but, desires to bring us into the glorious freedom offered in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Friends, know you are forgiven and be at peace.

Moments With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Mark 1:9-15

Morning Message

On Wednesday night, some of us gathered in the chapel to begin the Lenten season with the sign of ashes. The sign of the cross traced across our foreheads in dark, grimy ash. Two symbols in one: the dust of the earth, reminding us that from dust we came and to dust we will return. But, the second symbol-ashes formed into a cross, the symbol of resurrection, life after death. Death and rebirth contained in two swipes across our faces.

I stopped off at a store briefly on Wednesday night and received a few looks like, “Should we tell her she has dirt on her face?” One of my dear, dear friends did that at the mall one Ash Wednesday. She was shopping and noticed another customer, well-dressed and accessorized, and thought she would want to know she had a little something on her face. My friend said she was mortified when the woman responded with, “I know. I’ve just come from church. You know-Ash Wednesday.”

Presbyterians have not always observed Lent. Many of the Reformers who shaped our Protestant faith, set aside practices that they considered empty rituals or because they were just “too

Catholic.” That’s unfortunate. Our rituals and symbols become meaningful as we regularly acknowledge and practice them and as we make our way through the many experiences of life.

For example, when I look at my wedding ring, I don’t see how thin the band has become, or that it doesn’t sparkle like it did when Ed first placed it on my finger. What I see is forty plus years of living. And while I wouldn’t trade mine for anyone else’s life, it has not all been sweetness and light. And that is how it should be. My ring means more to me today than it did on that Thanksgiving day in 1979 when I first received it. It is an important symbol.

When Jesus submitted to Baptism by John in the Jordan River, he did so in obedience to God his Father. It was the sign to the world that he was being called to a life set apart for a particular purpose.

Something I had never noticed before in the many, many times I have read Mark’s account of this event, is that it was the Spirit, God’s Holy Spirit, who drove him out into the wilderness. I hope after three years of my work here among you, you know that I don’t believe God causes bad things to happen to us. God doesn’t make us fall victim to disaster or disease or any kind of malady. But, if we find ourselves in trouble or hardship or the worst kind of loss, God is there, too. God is there to bear witness to our grief and pain and strengthen us to live through it. God is there on the other side to help us sort out how to live once the crisis has passed. In a lot of ways, I have come to believe that’s what the fellowship of the church is all about- celebrating with one another and bearing witness to one another’s pain. Today it may be my turn to support you and some other day it will be your turn to support me.

When the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, it was not to starve him or torment him with tests of faith. It wasn’t to teach him magic tricks. God-Father, Son, or Holy Spirit-doesn’t cause us harm. God doesn’t trifle with us. God teaches us-if we are teachable.

Morgantown has been the setting for the state high school swimming finals this weekend. We followed it because Ed had students competing. The outcomes of the events were faithfully posted to Facebook. The accomplishments were impressive. But what almost always followed, were remarks about how far the team members had come since the beginning of the season, or freshman year or the neighborhood pool when they wouldn’t even get their faces wet. The skills involved in that sport, or any sport, didn’t come overnight. They were practiced and perfected.

An effective faith is one in which a teachable human heart opens itself to the impulses of God. In order to become more like God created us to be.

In scripture, we know something important, something transformational is happening when the text says this process took forty days or forty years. Something transformative was happening

when Jesus was in the wilderness forty days and forty nights, hungry and thirsty, tried and tempted, taunted by Satan. This was not like an episode of Survivor. This is how Jesus was shaped and formed and strengthened to be the Savior of the world.

A friend of mine was a family and marriage therapist. When talking about raising children, he used to say we want our children to experience occasional failure. Who wants their kids to fail? Not one of us. But, don't we want our kids to be able to cope with adversity? Don't we want them to be prepared to make their way in a world that is not all sweetness and light? Don't we hope they will find a way to advance society? Don't we pray that one of their objectives will be to bring peace to our troubled world?

Of course we do. And it will take their own forty-day or forty-year missions to accomplish the work God calls them to. And, while we have our plans for them, we can't possibly see or know what challenges and opportunities they will encounter.

But, God knows and is preparing them, as God prepares us, to respond in ways that affirm life, that calls and encourages people to reach for what is good and kind and faithful in order that their corner of the world is a growing reflection of the kingdom of heaven?

I have a dear cousin who lives in Oregon. One of his adult daughters lives in Kansas City. As it is with everyone, life is full, busy, complicated. It is often blessed. But one day last week, it was full of terror and grief.

She wrote and posted to Facebook a message I would like to share with you

:

I still believe in Kansas City.

I am angry and disappointed and sad that someone tarnished our name. That can never be erased and should never be forgotten. But, I still believe in Kansas City.

We may not like your team, but we'll make sure you have enough to eat. We'll razz you and tease you and make sure you feel welcome. I still believe in Kansas City.

Parade Day-Anytime I bumped into someone we both immediately said, "Oh, I'm sorry," then helped the other pass thru. I still believe in Kansas City.

Someone in front of me dropped a \$20 bill, so I picked it up and ran to them to return it. Five minutes later someone ran up behind me to hand me my favorite Chiefs hat that I dropped. I still believe in Kansas City.

In the crush of the crowd I was met with smiles and high fives and GO CHIEFS! bellowed in bass voices, from black and brown, white, and yellow, from young and old, men and women, unified by the most beautiful of colors, an absolute sea of reddest of reds. I still believe in Kansas City.

We're good people. Hardworking. We've known struggle and heartache. But we've also known love. We're welcoming and kind. Giving and respectful. I've seen these things shining from the eyes of the hardest of faces. We're good people.

I hope we remember. The shared joy and pride and excitement to see the Chiefs parade down Grand. How our children's faces lit up when they spotted their favorite players. Remember the grin on Mahomes's face, so fun to see him being a silly kid. Andy Reid all dressed in black (what the heck), and Kelse just straining for that microphone. I hope we remember the beautiful weather and the sun on our faces, and how happy we were crushed together amongst community. Remember the high before the low. I hope our spirits aren't sullied by this horrific event. Instead I pray we are lifted by reaching out to each other, helping each other, and healing together.

Because I see you. I know you are good as I am good, and because of us, our city is beautiful. I still believe in Kansas City. I still believe in all of you. And I love you all.

#kcstrong  
#ChiefsKingdom

Forty days from last Wednesday, the stone will be rolled away. I still believe in Jesus. I still believe in the power of life after death.

#jcstrong  
#God'sKingdom

\*Affirmation of Faith      Apostles' Creed p. 35  
\*Hymn 580    Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns  
Prayers of the Faithful and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings  
\*Hymn 607    Doxology  
\*Prayer of Dedication

**Gracious God, we give you thanks for all your gifts, including these forty days of Lent.**

**May they be to us a time of deep searching, be it during walks in the wilderness or by making courageous choices.**

**May we dedicate ourselves anew to discipleship, even as we dedicate our gifts to your kingdom. Amen.**

\*Hymn 215 What Wondrous Love Is This?

\*Blessing

These Lenten days will take us to the cross of Christ.

Go forward, knowing that you do not walk this way alone.

Do not fear, for the Word of God empowers us and the Holy Spirit sustains us.

May the God of the exodus lead us into freedom.

May the Holy Spirit bind us to God's will and to fellowship with believers over time and space.

May Christ Jesus, God's own Son, show us the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Announcements

Next Sunday is ECCHO and Cents-ability Sunday. Your contributions for those in need are appreciated.

A Lenten study will begin March 3 at 10:00AM in the chapel.

A congregational meeting will be held immediately following worship February 25. This is the Annual Meeting during which committee chairs present a review of mission and ministry.

We will also elect one member of the congregation to serve on the Nominating Committee.

The Presbytery of West Virginia met yesterday. Tim Moore served as our Elder Commissioner.

\*Postlude