

## **An Encouraging Word from Pastor Mike for February 12, 2021**

Hello Everyone! – Yes, I know it's cold, but look at the bright side. The days are getting longer, Spring is on its way (eventually), mask mandates are being lifted, more and more people are getting vaccinated, and we are looking forward to some things returning to normal. In the meantime, use these cold days to pray, meditate, study, do yoga, or whatever else is necessary for you to stay spiritually centered and sane. Last Sunday was pretty encouraging – we had 50 people join us for the hybrid worship service; 26 in person and 24 on Zoom! That's a pretty good sign of some things returning to normal.

**Mark this on your Calendars.** On March 12, 2022 we will be hosting a Maryland State **Covid-19 Vaccination Clinic** from 10 a.m. till 2 p.m. in our Church Hall. 1st, 2nd, and booster shots will be provided. More details on this will follow soon.

If anyone is interested in **volunteering to staff our nursery** on Sunday mornings please let me know. We may not be able to staff every Sunday morning but we can let our young families know those Sundays when nursery will be available.

***Much of the rest of this first section is repeated but important information.***



**THIS IS THE FINAL CALL FOR ALL VALENTINE WISHES!!** There are 3 ways to communicate your wishes to the office. 1. Fill out the form attached to this email and return it to the office either electronically or physically, 2. Email me directly, without the form, [mtcarmel21122@gmail.com](mailto:mtcarmel21122@gmail.com) , or 3. Call the office directly at 410-255-8887.

**Deadline has been EXTENDED TO THIS FRIDAY THE 11<sup>th</sup>.** (And, just like last year, in the spirit of the holiday – they can be anonymous!)

**Here's an important announcement from the Deb McMurtrey and the Outreach Committee.** "The Outreach Committee is sponsoring a Cookie Bake or Bring for Valentine's Day for our friends in the area Homeless Camps. This is the annual Cookie Bake/ Bring we normally conduct at Christmas but we were asked to change our event to Valentine's Day this year. Please consider baking or purchasing cookies for this event. The cookies will be collected by Friday, February 11th to be distributed to the Homeless camp in the morning of February 12th. Please make sure your cookie donation is at the church by 5:00 on Friday, Feb 11th. The committee will be packaging the cookies in Valentine bags. I can't think of a better place to be that evening! - Thanks for considering this mid-winter project.

**An important reminder** to members and friends who enter the building – through either entrance – **while the Child Development Center is open and operating: Please**

**be sure you are masked** – even if you are just going to the office or sanctuary. This is critically important for keeping our unvaccinated children safe and for setting a tone of caution for those using our facility.

**If you have prayer requests**, even if you plan to share them at Sunday worship, you may forward them ahead of time to Jen at the church office and she will compile a list to be used on Sunday morning.

**Signing On For Zoom Worship Services.** As most of you who Zoom our worship services know, I greet Zoom attendees as they sign on, take Zoom attendance, and assign names to phone numbers as phone callers sign on. I open the Zoom meeting at 9 a.m. in order to give people time to sign on. **I encourage you to sign on early to avoid the crush of people signing on at the last minute.** The earlier you sign on the easier it is for me to attend to the greeting responsibilities. It also gives us a chance to chat, and share prayer requests

**The Announcements and Bulletin for Sunday's service are included as attachments to this encouraging word.** Please feel free to print them out and either bring them with you to the service or to use them as your guide as you Zoom the service.

**A Word About Giving.** As we begin a new year, we face several challenges as a congregation. One of those challenges is financial. Your faithfulness and diligence in giving helped us weather many of those challenges and for that I and the leadership team thank you. However, last year we also had federal help, and assistance from our annual conference, which we will not receive this year. This presents yet another challenge – to meet the financial obligations of our congregation while supporting the mission and ministry needs of our community. Our greatest and perhaps only means of support in meeting this challenge in this coming year will be through your prayerful and faithful giving. You can help in several ways. First by prayerfully considering increasing your weekly or monthly offering. Secondly by enrolling in our E-giving program. However you choose to support this ministry know that it is deeply appreciated and will enable our continued ministry presence in this community.

### **An Encouraging Word**

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” - Jeremiah 31: 33

It's fairly easy to lose sight of God amid all the confusion we experience these days. This is especially so if we don't have God's Word close at hand, written on our hearts in both

literally and figuratively. I have lost count of the times when I needed a comforting word from God and it sprang immediately to mind. There are three sets of verses that I don't need to run to the bible and look up. One is the Lord's Prayer, another is the Twenty-Third Psalm, and another is Matthew 6: 25 – 34 – the one that begins "Consider the lilies of the field, they neither toil or spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." It ends with the phrase, "Therefore be not anxious about tomorrow for tomorrow will take care of itself."

To be honest I don't have all of the verses down pat – after all there are so many versions of it I tend to get the different versions muddled – but I do know the beginning and the end, and the gist of what comes in between. But the words are there to remind me and to comfort me in those times when I feel like giving in or giving up to the powers of confusion and despair that can so easily overtake me. I'm always thankful for God's Word that simply didn't remain on the page but was written on my heart. I'm also grateful for the people who had a hand in writing it there; for the way they lived their lives demonstrating God's word in such a way that it stuck.

How does one write God's Law, or anything else for that matter, on a person's heart? It's a good question considering the state of people's hearts during times of upheaval and change; when the bedrock of everything they believe in is crumbling and their hearts are hardened by cynicism, doubt, skepticism, and suspicion. What has the power to penetrate a fearful or hardened heart? The only words powerful enough to get through shields of suspicion and doubt would be words that carry the power of authenticity demonstrated through sacrifice. In other words, the person who is declaring the word, is doing so by "walking the talk". The greatest example of this is seen in Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

The prophecy of Jeremiah (quoted above) comes true in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' act of sacrifice on the cross would emphasize and demonstrate the depth of God's love for God's people. On the cross the authenticity of God's love, lived out in Jesus, would be demonstrated beyond doubt and the image of God's son on the cross would sear God's law of love into cynical human hearts.

In the Gospel reading from John, Chapter 12, Jesus foresees his own death on the cross and portrays that sacrifice as the planting of a seed. Seed must be given up to the earth, sacrificed, in order that it may eventually bear fruit. In this case the seed is Jesus' life, given up that it may bear fruit in the changed hearts of God's people. This is the way. God writes His law of love on the hearts of people – they saw the authenticity of God's love demonstrated on the cross.

Here's the really neat thing. People who have experienced God's love demonstrated in their lives through the authentic loving actions of others will themselves become instruments in God's hand helping to write the law of God's love in the hearts of others. For instance, the verses from Matthew I quoted above, especially the last phrase, were written in my heart by my mother who would often quote them to her worry-wart son (me) when I was busy imagining all sorts of future calamities. She also demonstrated these verses as she lived her life calmly and serenely even as she encountered the health problems that would eventually claim her life. So yes, she would often quote those words to me, but she lived them as well, and in so doing planted them in me. Yes, I can readily quote some of the words, but I really get their meaning, I understand their message, and rely upon that Word in my difficult moments, because they've been planted in my heart. Yes, I still worry, but not as much because those words about not worrying have become a part of me. I only hope that somehow I am able to plant words of assurance and comfort in the lives of others by living them out myself.

People these days hunger for authenticity. They also hunger for a holy Word of comfort and assurance as they face the uncertainty and anxiety generated by everything that's going on in the world right now. We are called to be instruments of God; scribes writing God's word of love, assurance, and comfort in the lives of others as we live lives grounded in God's law of love. The only way to plant that law of love in the lives of others is through living out that law of love in the presence of others. To the extent that we become God's scribes, living out our faith, committing God's word to our memories, our lives, and our actions, and planting those seed in others, we will find this world becoming a much brighter place.

That's all for today. I'll see you on Sunday either on Zoom or at in-person worship. Until then be well, stay safe, make good decisions in this Coronavirus environment, and in please stay connected to each other and to God.

Blessings & Peace, Mike