

An Encouraging Word from Pastor Mike for February 19, 2022

Hello Everyone - I'm praying that you are all keeping warm and healthy. I'm also praying that you're not getting tired of these missals. The one this week is a bit unusual, let's just say I was strangely inspired and leave it at that. So here we go with the news that's fit to print and a word that I hope you will find encouraging.

The office will be closed this Monday, February 21st for President's Day.

I want to encourage all of you to complete the **Readiness360 Survey** which you can access by clicking on this link <http://app.readiness360.org/survey/login> . Once there enter the survey code 8532632722 and begin completing the survey. A pin number is not necessary, but they will provide you with one just in case you need to exist before completing and then return to it. The more of you that complete the survey the more helpful it will be to us as we consider engaging in ministries that will help us impact more people and grow our congregation. Once completed we will also be able to apply for an Annual Conference program designed to guide congregations toward greater vitality. Whether or not our Congregation is selected to participate in this program, the insight gained through completing the Readiness360 survey will be invaluable as we plan for the future. Though your name is asked for in the survey your responses will be anonymous, the name is just to reconnect you with your survey if you have to leave it before completing it. **We need as many people as possible to complete it by February 25th!**

Daily Lenten Devotion Booklets are now available. These books are courtesy of The Society of St. Andrew and contain scripture readings, reflections, and prayers. The booklets will be available in the narthex. Please note, there is a limited supply!

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

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.

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

“The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak” Genesis 32: 22 - 24.

There can be no doubt that life is a journey filled with greetings and leave takings; each one an opportunity to encounter God. In the birthing room, where life enters the world, in that sacred moment there is the presence of God. In those wondrous moments when we greet strangers who become friends – we are in the presence of God. Most especially, in those moments of sacred leave taking that is the death of a friend or loved one – we are in the presence of God.

You may be asking yourself how this can be an encouraging word. Most of us really don't want to deal with death. We don't want to be reminded of it or confronted by it. Yet we cannot escape it – it is as much a part of life as birth is. This is especially so now considering how much we have been impacted by the prospect of human mortality bound up in the Coronavirus crises. So, I want to say something about this that I hope will be a comfort.

As I was struggling with this, I stumbled on a familiar bit of scripture that I believe can cast the leave-taking we call death in a different and positive light. The scripture is found in Genesis 32:22 – 30. I'll warn you ahead of time, what follows is a non-standard interpretation of this text. Jacob is on his way to meet his brother Esau who he has every reason to believe hates him. So fearfully he approaches this meeting bringing along with him everything he owns, and most importantly his family whom he loves. He is on a journey toward the thing he fears the most – the anger and retribution of his brother. Jacob and his family arrive at the Jabbok River (which in our modern day is Wadi Zurkah or Blue River in Western Jordan). It is a demarcation of sorts since the territory on the other side of the Jabbok is the land occupied by Esau. Jacob has already sent all his possessions ahead into the land of his brother. Now he sends his wives and children across the river and is alone. It is there, in the night, that he wrestles with a stranger variously interpreted to be an angel or God. The event changes and marks Jacob who, the next morning, proceeds to the meeting with his brother. A meeting that is a joyous reunion rather than a violent confrontation.

There is a leave-taking here. Jacob sends his family ahead into the unknown and is left alone to wrestle with God. I would imagine it is an emotional parting as Jacob's family crosses over; it would have been for me. I find here many parallels to the leave-taking we call death; the event where we send those we love across to an unknown territory and are ourselves left alone to wrestle with God. In that wrestling, if

we don't run from it, we can find ourselves comforted, encouraged, changed, and prepared for the rest of our own journeys. Led by the familiar scriptures, psalms, and prayers through grief, doubt, hope, and promise we wrestle with God. Through the challenge "to believe where we have not seen" (John 20:29) we wrestle with God. That's why I call death a sacred leave-taking, because as we stand alone on this side of the Jabbok, we find ourselves on holy ground wrestling with God. In that wrestling there is transformation.

I have found myself on this holy ground many times. With the passing of my grandparents and parents; and with the passing of my sister. Each time has been a struggle. Each time has been a wrestling match with God. In each one I've found myself standing on higher and higher ground to glimpse, perhaps more clearly than before, that place to which I am also bound. In that wrestling I find comfort.

We should also remember that Jacob crossed over the Jabbok himself, humbled, changed, and blessed through his wrestling with God. In that land he had previously feared he found welcome, reunion, and forgiveness, nothing less than what we will find when the time comes for us to cross the Jabbok. I don't know what sacred leave-takings we have yet to face but I do know that with each one God will be present challenging us, comforting us, transforming us, and always inviting us to believe.

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