

### **Midweek Lenten Services: Look at God doing a NEW thing in 2023! (New)**

This year, three area congregations will observe Lent together: St. John's UCC, New Athens (Pastor Bob Koch), Friedens UCC, Marissa (Pastor Brett Palmer) and, of course, our own Holy Ghost and Trinity family of faith.

Ash Wednesday and Good Friday will be held at our own home churches, but the other services will rotate, with all three pastors present but the host pastor preaching. Each congregation will offer a soup and sandwich supper at 5:30 PM prior to worship.

Offering envelopes from each congregation would be collected together at each service, and then distributed after worship. Envelopes will be available at each church should you not bring with you. Feel free to designate your offerings as you choose. Loose offering will go to the UCC fund for California disaster relief. You are also welcome to make a donation to the Marissa Ministerial Alliance.

### **Lent 2023: A Time of Repentance, A Season of Grace**

January 1, 2023, marked the 250th anniversary of John Newton's hymn "Amazing Grace." In honor of that milestone, this year's Lenten worship will use that song as its theme. After hearing John Newton's own story on Ash Wednesday, we'll move on to several Biblical characters with lives powerfully touched by grace. Along the way, we'll sing "Amazing Grace," tying its lyrics to the stories we hear and the liturgy we use each Wednesday.

#### **Ash Wednesday, February 22 (Biddleborn)**

**1 Chronicles 17:16-17      "John Newton: Amazed by Grace"**

John Newton's life is a case study of grace at work. Once a foul-mouthed, blasphemous captain of slave ships, Newton became a pastor and a leader of England's anti-slavery movement. Ash Wednesday worship will include the imposition of ashes as well as the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

#### **Wednesday, March 1 (New Athens)**

**Matthew 11:3      "John the Baptist: Grace Vs. Certainty"**

Unlike Gideon, John the Baptist didn't struggle with doubt or with following God's call. "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees," he thundered, "and every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be thrown into the fire." John was so certain of what he believed, in fact, that Jesus was something of a disappointment to him. Jesus wasn't *anything* like the fire-breathing, damn-them-all-to-hell version of the Messiah John expected.

Imprisoned by Herod, facing almost certain death, John needed to know that all he'd said and done hadn't been in vain. So, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Sometimes, as was the case with John, God's grace has to batter its way through the walls of our certainty and pride.

#### **Wednesday, March 8 (Biddleborn)**

**Acts 9      "Paul: Grace Vs. Stubbornness"**

Paul was a tough nut to crack, spiritually speaking. Stubborn to the extreme, unwilling or unable to see farther than his own rigid beliefs, this persecutor had to, quite literally, be knocked off his high horse before he saw the light. Once that happened, though, Saul the Persecutor became Paul the Apostle, a tireless and committed servant of Jesus Christ. Stubborn though we may be, God's grace is more stubborn still.

#### **Wednesday, March 15 (Marissa)**

**Judges 6-8      "Gideon: Grace Vs. Weakness"**

Gideon argued with God, resisted God's call, and demanded miracle after miracle as proof God was with him. Yet, *somehow*, Gideon still managed to save his people from the armies of their enemies. That "somehow" was grace at work in the heart of a fearful, stubborn, doubting, and, honestly, not always too bright servant of God.

Wednesday, March 22 (New Athens)

*Judges 13-16* "Samson: Grace Vs. Pride"

Samson's strength is legendary – as is his vanity and selfishness. God promised that Samson would "begin" to save the Israelites from the Philistines. Samson did just that, though he battled the Philistines more to save his wounded pride than to fight for his people.

Undone by that very pride, taken prisoner and humiliated, Samson did at least one unselfish thing in his life, pulling down the temple of the Philistine god Dagon on all gathered there to worship. Sometimes, grace must do its work in *spite* of us. Even when it does, though, it can't save us from the consequences of selfishness pride, as Samson discovered.

Wednesday, March 29 (Darmstadt)

*Luke 7: 6-7* "A Roman Centurion: Grace Vs. Shame"

The Roman centurion in Luke was a rarity – a high-ranking Roman officer who supported the Jewish people, valued the Jewish faith, and even paid for the construction of a new synagogue. When one of his servants fell ill, the centurion sent word to Jesus, hoping Jesus might heal him.

Jesus was on his way when the centurion told him not to come because he, the centurion, wasn't worthy to have Jesus enter his home. In fact, the centurion added, that was why he hadn't come to see Jesus face to face in the first place.

Just as his troops obeyed his orders, the centurion said, so he believed that Jesus' word carried authority, too. "Just say the word," the centurion pleaded, "and my servant will be healed." Jesus did, the servant was, and Jesus was left marveling at a pagan soldier whose faith was greater than any he'd seen even among his own people. No one is beyond saving, and none of us are so unworthy that God's grace and power can't touch our lives.

Maundy Thursday, April 6 (Marissa)

*Matthew 26* "Jesus' Disciples: Grace Vs. Passing the Buck"

When Jesus announced at the Last Supper that one of his disciples would betray him, Matthew tells us they all asked, "Surely not I, Lord?" When it comes to betraying Jesus, we tend to think that it will always be someone *else* doing the betraying, not us. Sometimes, grace's job is to break through our tendency to pass the buck and face our own sinfulness.

Maundy Thursday worship reminds us, as we gather around the Lord's Table in Holy Communion, that we are as likely as those first disciples to betray our Lord and just as clueless about the possibility of that happening.

Good Friday, April 7 (Darmstadt)

*Luke 23* "The Penitent Thief: Grace Vs. Procrastination"

Even as he hung dying on a cross, gasping to draw each breath, grace reached out through Jesus and touched the heart of a penitent thief dying beside him. "Truly, I tell you," Jesus told him, "Today you'll be with me in Paradise." It's never too late to invite the grace of Jesus Christ into our lives – to repent and find the same acceptance and new life promised to that thief long ago. On Good Friday, we'll read through the story of Jesus' suffering and death as lights dim and candles are extinguished in a Tenebrae service of darkness.