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Your Pastor's Ponderings.....

It might sound strange, but the penitential season of Lent is my favorite. Oh, I love the pomp and triumphalism of Easter and the joyous hope of Christ's birth found in the Christmas season, but there is something raw and real about Lent that I find cathartic and true to life. I appreciate a God that comes to earth and suffers with us instead of causing us to suffer and watching from afar. It is empowering to know that Jesus struggled with temptation and doubt, that he was treated with contempt, despised, and suffered untold indignities like everyone else that has ever lived. And who hasn't struggled with how to come back and how to re-enter life after the betrayal of those closest to you? Who hasn't had to worry about money, or struggled with the faulty perceptions of family and friends about who we are as people, or wondered about the importance of money, or our relationship to the state, or where God's presence is in the midst of despair?

These are issues and situations that we all have to struggle with in life and Jesus did so and Lent calls us to reflect on these things and challenges us to choose the ways of life and wholeness.

There are lots of ways to enter into this Lenten journey. One of the traditional ways is to forego some of the habits and tendencies that draw us away from health and wholeness. So we give up chocolate and cut back on our sugar intake, we cease drinking alcohol and using illegal drugs that often lead us ever so subtly to paths of darkness, dysfunction and destruction. Some give up eating meat or eating out in restaurants. I have found this to be helpful at times and have incorporated this sacrificial behavior into my Lenten journey. All of your lives are different than mine, so fine tuning what you sacrifice giving up for Lent is totally individual.

Wanting to be more positive and less focused on the negative aspects of our lives, some have found it helpful to take on new behaviors and ways of thinking instead of giving things up. My mom used to read the four gospels every Lent. Others write letters to friends or make peace with those in their lives where there is a wedge or issue that stands in the way of an honest and mature relationship. Still others will choose to eat more vegetables or spend time listening to music or sleeping more hours each day or going for a walk and exercising. Some focus on spiritual things by meditating or praying more or just sitting in silence listening for God's guidance or even standing up as an advocate for folks who are homeless, hungry or hounded by the powers that be or even [GASP] going to church ALL 6 Sundays during Lent.

Looking for the presence of the Divine in the midst of the raw and gritty world in which we live is what Lent is all about. Jesus taught us that those are the places in which you would find God: feeding the poor, visiting those imprisoned, welcoming those who have been excluded, challenging the misuse of power by those in authority, or simply sitting with folks struggling to make ends meet. There are a thousand ways in which to live into this Lenten challenge and I will leave it all up to you in your daily lives to figure out how you will deepen your own relationship to the mysterious and powerful presence of God. Our worship services and readings will draw us into these areas. Looking forward to walking this year with you on Christ's Lenten adventure, I am

Yours in Christ,
Rev. Mark

SPECIAL WORSHIP SERVICES IN FEBRUARY

Ask the Pastor [Annual Meeting] Sunday

ONE Service @ 10am ~ February 4, 2024

Each year, we as a church gather to conduct the business of FCCEJ by electing officers and committee members, hearing reports, voting on the budget, and hearing any business that might rightfully come to the full body of the church. We celebrate the five year membership anniversaries of our members and remember those covenantal partners who have joined God's glorious and eternal kingdom during the last year. Everyone is invited to speak and members get to vote. Because we want everyone to come, we have one service and hold the meeting immediately after the service. The Church's Annual Meeting also happens to correspond to the anniversary date of when Rev. Mendes first came to be our pastor; so instead of a sermon, he answers questions as a way of checking in with the congregation. Anyone can proffer a question and he will answer as many as time allows.

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2024 ~ 7pm in the Sanctuary

Lent is a key time when we reflect on the meaning of our Christian faith and the importance to our faith of Christ's passion and death. One scholar stated that it is impossible to grasp the true meaning of Easter unless you travel down the darkened, narrowed streets of Lent. Our Ash Wednesday Service will be on Wednesday, February 14, 2023 at 7pm. The Ashes either placed on your forehead or wrists (optional) remind us of our connections to Christ's suffering as well as the finitude of our mortal life and thus our total dependance on God/Jesus for our eternal hope. Everyone is welcome.

Pulpit Exchange with Rev. Karen Mendes

February 25, 2024

Rev. Mendes' partner, Karen Mendes, is the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Burlington. Each year the two exchange pulpits with Karen coming to FCCEJ to lead worship at both services and Mark going to First Baptist to lead their worship service. It has become a well appreciated service for a great number of reasons and to add another, we are going to exchange our Organist / Choir Director for the day. So our own Bethany Blake will lead the choir and play the organ at First Baptist and their Organist, Evan Allen, will play our organ and or piano at our first service. Come and hear the great preaching of Rev. Karen Mendes!

FCCEJ ANNUAL MEETING

The First Congregational Church of Essex Junction is organized with congregational polity which means that when the members of the church get together in an official meeting, what they vote is the law of the land. Congregational Meetings are the governing body of the church. Naturally, we cannot get together to make every decision for it would be quite cumbersome and time consuming, but we set the budget, elect officers and seat committees so that those people and groups can do the will of the body. Sometimes we vote on beliefs or social issues and when we do they become ratified and determinative in our body and policies. Staff, officers, committees and recognized groups all present information concerning their specific aspect of FCCEJ's ministry so that every member knows everything going on in the church. While only Members can vote, ALL participants may ask questions and be a part of the discussions. Our Annual Meeting will take place on Sunday, February 4th at 11:15am, immediately following the one service we have at 10am. Be sure to come and participate in the governance of your church.

Lenten Prayers

During the 6 weeks of Lent, the staff at FCCEJ has pledged to pray for all active members and constituents in our faith community. Each week, starting on February 18 and going until Easter, we will publish a list of names in the Sunday worship bulletin. These are the people that will be prayed for that week. If you have a specific prayer request, please send it to welcome@fcej.org or call the church office. If not, we will pray as the Spirit moves us. All prayer requests will remain confidential unless we hear otherwise.

Please feel free to pray for the folks on the list as part of your Lenten journey. By Easter morning, everyone at FCCEJ will have been lifted up in prayer.

Lent begins on a beautiful day of love this year, February 14. This gives the word love a richer, fuller meaning. Love from our God. Love of family. Love from Jesus. Love to your neighbor and love of self.

Are you planning on changing anything in your life during Lent this year? Are you accepting the challenge of giving something up, or maybe taking something on? We remember Jesus' life, his ministry, his sacrifices and what it means today for us in our lives and in the world. Forty typically indicates a time of testing, trial, penance, purification, and renewal. Forty days was the length of time Jesus was in the desert, or wilderness, connecting with God and preparing for his ministry. Do you take time to be with God and help prepare yourself for what is to come in your life? Are you finding ways to deepen your faith and walk the path of your faith journey? It will most likely be challenging, rewarding, peaceful, insightful, lonely, quiet, and Spirit filled. Our journey can also be a time of forgiveness, calming, and restfulness. Have you ever wondered what it must be like to live in someone else's shoes? Maybe this Lent you decide to take something away that you normally take for granted but that maybe someone you know cannot do. Maybe you give up this luxury item and stop eating it or using this one thing that you know this other person cannot do, have or eat. Maybe you have decided to take on a task that you know would help yourself and/or others as you move forward on your journey and they on theirs. Give it some thought. I'm still thinking about what mine will be. I hope you will share what you decide to do.

Lent is also time when we can be more intentional about our daily devotional life and prayer time with God. If you are one who would prefer to have a daily devotion in your email inbox, you can subscribe to the UCC's daily devotions at <https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/>. I'm sure you can find a quiet place in your house to sit. Maybe you have that soft comfy chair that everyone in your house knows is your place to sit. Maybe your time to connect with God is with your morning tea/coffee. I would like to encourage you to place your bible close by or use <https://www.biblegateway.com/> if you want to look up more scripture, read a devotional each day of Lent and set aside ten minutes of your day to sit and connect with your God.

For those of you who like a little history lesson ... Lent is a 40 day journey, not counting Sundays, until we arrive at Easter. According to the Bible, Jesus' death and resurrection occurred around the time of the Jewish Passover, which was celebrated on the first full moon following the vernal equinox. For Christians, today, Easter Sunday falls on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox (or the first day of spring). If the first full moon occurs on the equinox, Easter is the following Sunday. So ... Easter Sunday can fall anywhere between March 22 and April 25th. Once you know when Easter Sunday is...you count back 40 days, not including Sundays, and you will arrive on Ash Wednesday. Easter falls on March 31st this year and so counting back 40 days, except Sundays, we end up on Ash Wednesday, February 14th.

Please remember to mark your calendars for Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper, Ash Wednesday service and Pretzel Sunday on March 17th.

Blessed to be on my faith journey with you,

Laurie Chipman

Christian Education Director

Vacation Bible Camp

Mark your calendars now!

August 5th – 9th, 2024

Mornings 9am-12noon OR

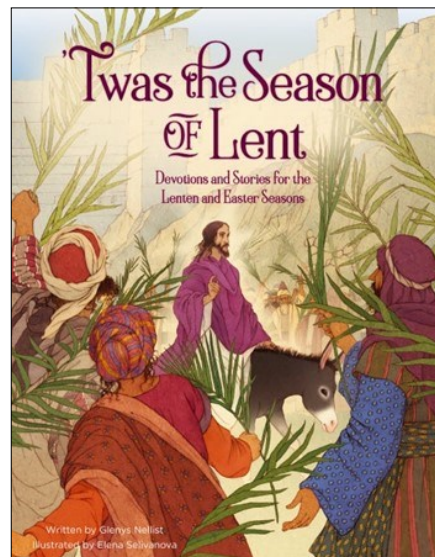
All-Day 9am to 4pm (\$100 / camper ~ scholarships available)

Online Registration is now LIVE! Take a moment and sign up today! Help us with our planning. Volunteer adults, youth and campers can all register on this link:

www.fccej.org/v5/grow-in-faith/vacation-bible-camp/

Interested in what you can do to help with VB Camp?

Music Station ~ Science Station ~ Craft Station ~ Game Station ~ Reflection & Snack Station ~ Group Leaders ~ Station Leaders ~ Station Helpers ~ Set up before camp starts ~ Work on a project before camp week ~ There's something for everyone!



Devotions and Stories for the Lenten & Easter Season.

By Glenys Nellist
On sale here...



Faith Formation News

****Watch for Family Ministry emails in your inbox****

Children's Ministry has been working on learning the song "From the Rising of the Sun" in the program room. They seem to be enjoying learning the lyrics and the hand movements that go along with them. Please ask your child to share the song with you!

We continue to learn about Jesus' ministry and last week they created crafts to depict storms, as the children learned about Jesus helping in a storm. Laurie shared with me two pictures the youth created, that I have put up on the bulletin board on your way up to worship. Enjoy!

Elizabeth Miller, Children's Ministry Coordinator

Faith Formation Sunday Morning Calendar

February 4 ~ Communion / Spiritual Friends (PreK—2nd) - **One Service at 10am**

February 11 & 18 ~ Faith Formation Peer Groups

February 25th ~ All Family Worship

Faith Formation Offering

2023-2024—Ice Cream Aunties Mission of Aloha (Lahaina Fire Relief)

Current total \$492.75

Remember to use the small white bible story envelopes on the Narthex shelf so that your offering goes to help those in Lahaina. Loose money in the offering plate goes to our general church budget.

J.A.M. (Jesus And Me)

March 3rd at 11:15ish (after our 10am single worship service).

All 3rd – 5th graders are invited to stay after church with a parent to have fun building relationships, practice lighting the worship candles and playing a game.

Youth Ministry

**It's time to build self-confidence. Build Community with those around you.
Find out who you are. Come feel the love that God hands out to all so freely.**

'Our Youth' Bulletin Board

Youth, have you participated in something fun lately? Would you like to share a picture for the bulletin board? Send in your picture to Laurie and she will add it to the board. Have an event coming up? Laurie would like to hear about it so she can put it on her calendar and some support you. Reach out to her by email lchipman@fccej.org or send her a text!

Youth Calendar:

February 4th ~ Annual Meeting Childcare (JHY & SHY) 11am to 12:30pmish – Games/Movie/Toys/Projects

February 11 ~ SH Youth (9th-12th) 11:30-1:30pm ~ bake cookies & more

February 18 ~ JH Youth (6th – 8th) 11:30-1:30pm ~ working on a good Samaritan skit & College Care Packages

February 25 & March 3 ~ off ~ school break weekends

Save the Dates:

March 17th ~ Pretzel Sunday

Come early at 7am and mix up dough or 8am to roll pretzels, or 8:30am to bake. You can even come during second service and help the children roll pretzels.

May 5 ~ COTS Walk ~ JHY & SHY

July 28-31 ~ New England Regional Youth Event @ Silver Lake Camp & Retreat Center, in Sharon, CT for all youth ages 13-18. Youth are invited to join together and attend this awesome experience! RYE will be a place to grow your spirit and connect with other youth from all over New England. This beautiful outdoor ministry site features swimming, boating, and a challenge course for team building. More details coming soon.

Nursery Staff (Senior High Youth & College Students)

Reminder to staff to sign up on the calendar for slots (first come first serve). Calendar dates now go out through January. On the 1st Sundays of the month you will arrive 15 minutes earlier for our 10am service. Others who would like to join the staff, please contact Laurie for an interview and orientation. You earn \$20 per worship service.

Missions Committee

Joint Urban Ministry Project (JUMP)

JUMP has a drop-in center in Burlington on South Winooski Ave. According to the JUMP website, “The JUMP Drop-In Center offers hospitality, direct assistance with utilities, food, laundromat, vouchers to area thrift stores, toiletries, referrals and more.”

Your Missions Committee has supported this organization in the past and would like to make everyone aware of an opportunity for you to participate in the outreach work of JUMP. They are holding an online auction starting January 31st until January 9th. To bid on amazing items, go to the JUMP website at <http://www.jumpvt.org/>

Seventh Annual Cabin Fever Calcutta

Are you ready for a mid-winter, entertaining social event to dispel the winter doldrums? Join us for the 7th Annual Cabin Fever Calcutta to be held on March 9, 2024 at the Catamount Country Club in Williston. Jamie Polli, the red sequin-jacketed Emcee, will be with us once again. There are rumors that there might be some additional sequins in the room as well!

This is an evening you won't want to miss. We begin with a social hour and cash bar at 5pm. There are additional opportunities to support the Montana Service Trip by participating in the raffles for an iPad or a hotel overnight. Team members will be happy to assist you. Many attendees also enjoy the chance to select a premium bottle of wine from our Wine Pull.

If you have never been to a Calcutta, here's what happens:

- ◆ After dinner, the game begins as balls are randomly drawn and a variety of prizes are awarded.
- ◆ Once your ball number is drawn, you are eliminated.
- ◆ To add suspense to the game, the last 10 players have the opportunity to negotiate sharing the \$1000 Grand Prize.

Tickets, available in Fellowship Hall on Sunday mornings, include two dinners as well as a ball for the Calcutta drawing and cost \$150. Be sure to write Calcutta on the note line of your check.

All proceeds from this fundraising event support the Montana Service Trip that FCCEJ is sponsoring.

See you there!

Deacons

Your Deacons continue to help lead worship services. We reach out to greet and welcome visitors.

Last fall, we started to have a single 10am service for communion on the first Sunday of each month. How wonderful to worship with the whole congregation and mingle with folks from both services!

We also plan to begin live streaming the second (10:15) service on the 3rd Sunday of each month. This will bring the great music of Finally at First and the lively energy of children to our online audience. Stay tuned for more updates.

We are now at the close of the season of Advent and Epiphany and looking forward to Ash Wednesday bringing the start of Lent on February 14th.

This part of the Christian year is called Ordinary Time, which is made up of the weeks between Epiphany and Lent. While it is called Ordinary Time, it can be a time to learn more about the extraordinary message of hope that Jesus brings to us. Jesus called his disciples to join him to spread the good news that we are all children of God. Jesus invites us to be in community with one another and praise God together. It is a cold season but also a season of joy as the days get longer. With so much to be thankful for, can we really call it Ordinary Time?

Alison Wermer, Deacon Co-Chair



Valentines for Veterans

This Valentine's Day we have the opportunity to share the light and love of Christ to our veterans. If you are willing and able, please consider buying or making a card and/or writing a note.

We will have a collection basket in the Fellowship Hall on Sunday mornings or you may bring them to the Church Office during the week. All Valentines need to be at FCCEJ by the morning of February 13 so that we can deliver them.

Thank you!

**Shrove Tuesday
Pancake Supper**



In the old days, when fasting and sacrifice were the primary ways in which one accessed and centered yourself on the God, the night before Lent started people ate all the good stuff that they were not allowed to eat during the penitential season. Sugar and chocolate, whipped cream and sweet syrups, bacon and sausage, and anything else in the house that wouldn't last for the six weeks of Lent. It was a sumptuous feast. Some folks around the world combined it with fanciful parades, costumes and extravagant parties. Well, we experience and find God in non-sacrificial ways these days through acts of kindness, concrete behaviors in which we spread Christ's love, spiritual disciplines, reading scripture, praying more,

making peace with folks, and simply spending more time communing with the Divine. HOWEVER, we still like the idea of having a Pancake Dinner with lots of sweet toppings and plenty of bacon and sausage! It will be fun to come together for a church-wide meal and experience some really great people, maybe make some new friends and enjoy some good conversations. Shrove Tuesday comes on February 13th [an early Valentines treat?] and the dinner will run from 5:30 to 7pm. Come and bring a friend that likes to eat!

Yoga @ First

Come practice a compassionate, inquisitive sequence to integrate the mind, body, and soul. In each session, we will focus, breathe, build heat, strengthen, and relax. Join us Tuesday evenings, from 5-6:15 in the Sanctuary. Wear comfortable, non restrictive clothing. Bring a mat or borrow one. Donations (to FCCEJ) welcome, but not required.

Fall Prevention - Tai Chi

Join your faith family for Tai Chi class on Tuesday mornings at 10:15 in the Fellowship Hall. This is a beginner class of slow, controlled motions that aid in strength and balance. There is no charge for the class but donations to FCCEJ are appreciated. Contact Betty Adams for more information: adamsvt123@gmail.com. Sponsored by Age Well.

Grief Support Group

2nd Thursday of each month ~ 10-11:30am in Marvin Lounge.

This group is open to anyone experiencing the loss of a loved one. The sessions are facilitated by Sharon Dettenrieder, MSN, RN and Mary McHugh, MAPS. Both Sharon and Mary have years of experience in leading Grief Support groups as well as personal experience with loss. Next session is 2/8. Please contact the church office for more information: 802-878-5745 or welcome@fccej.org.

Lunchtime Book Group

The Lunchtime Book Group will meet on Monday February 19 at 11:30 in the Marvin Lounge. This month we will discuss Nory Ryan's Song by Patricia Reilly Giff. We have had several new folks join us this fall, and always welcome new members. We read one book a month and choose books from a variety of genres. Our discussions are informal, but always thought provoking. Fellowship is an important part of our meetings. Bring a brown bag lunch and join us on the third Monday of each month at 11:30 in the Marvin Lounge.

FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS

SARGENT, Rusty	02/01
RUSSELL, Clint	02/02
CASEY, Ruth	02/04
FINNIE, Kathy	02/06
GOEDKEN, Ethan	02/09
GRAY, Peter	02/12
BENTON, Mark	02/14
EVANS, Abigail	02/14
PARKER, Nancy	02/14
KELLY, Jennifer	02/15
LONGWELL, Cindy	02/15
WOOD, Rachel	02/15
BEEBE, Sharon	02/17
RAUT, Joy	02/17
GARRAPY, Betty	02/19
PAUL, George	02/19
EDWARDS, Elijah	02/20
LAFLAM, Kaydence	02/20
BOURN, Molly	02/22
EHLER, Duke	02/22
HOLDEN, Sue	02/22
KINNEY, John	02/22
RODDYGARVEY, Ronan	02/23
AHOKAS, Cheryl	02/24
DETTENRIEDER, Sharon	02/24
DEWEY, Mae	02/24
DAVIS, Robert	02/25
GABERT, Valerie	02/26
MCGEARY, Matt	02/26
KOCH, Braeden	02/27
MARSHALL, Connie	02/28

SERMON TALKBACK

Have you ever heard Rev. Mark say something in his sermon that piqued your interest or curiosity? Did you ever hear a sermon where you wanted to argue a bit about what was said or have a deeper conversation around the themes and lessons gleaned from God? Do you ever just want to belong to a group that supports each other and talks about significant issues of life and faith? Did you ever want to go to a group and receive free coffee and goodies? Well, if you answered yes to any of these questions, then feel free to come to Sermon Talkback every Tuesday morning from 8:30 to 10am. We get 15 to 25 people each week in the Marvin Lounge and we have some pretty enlightening conversations. We laugh a lot, and when someone is in need of some extra support, we give it.

COFFEE CLATTER

Do you like to talk? Do you like to drink coffee and enjoy a muffin or scone? Well if you do, then come to Martone's on Friday morning from 8-9am for a time of communing with other folks from the church. There are no pre-arranged subjects or study materials so come and bring up anything you'd like to discuss and be assured, there will be others interested in expressing their opinion!

CHRISTIAN BRIDGE

On the first and third Fridays of every month, we meet in the Marvin Lounge to have some fun playing bridge. There are all types of skill sets playing and we have snacks, drinks [non-alcoholic] and fun! In February, we will meet on Feb 1 and 15 from 1:30 – 4pm. We generally have two to three tables and play two to three rounds. The high score gets a free homemade jam from the minister's stores. We are also blessed to have a number of non-church players who just come to play, laugh and enjoy life. This is a great group to bring a friend.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT SEARCHERS

Our Searchers Group is currently studying *The Awakened Brain* by Lisa Miller. In her book she proposes scientific proof that religion and spirituality are not only a part of humanity's DNA but both help mitigate better than any other form of treatment the negative aspects of depression and anxiety. The subject matter allows anyone to come and participate in the discussion whether or not you have read the book or come to all sessions. We have just discussed the first two chapters so there is a lot more material to go over.

Once we complete the book, or if the group so desires, we will turn our attention to the 4th season of *The Chosen*, a great series of presentations on Christ's life and ministry. They are very well done and if possible, starting on February 21, we will watch an episode each week and discuss it. Be sure to avail yourself of this tremendous group and bring a friend with you. We meet every Wednesday night from 7-9pm in Marvin Lounge.

COMMUNITY CONCERTS @ FIRST 2024 SEASON

We have a terrific, eclectic line-up for our third year here at FCCEJ. You can use the links below to get detailed information about each of the artists. All concerts are Sundays at 3pm in the Sanctuary.

- **March 10:** Va Et Vient - Vermont trio playing traditional Québécois, French and Cajun tunes
<https://sevendaystickets.com/events/va-et-vient-3-10-2024>
- **April 14:** Vermont Virtuosi - Flute and piano
<https://sevendaystickets.com/events/vermont-virtuosi-4-14-2024>
- **September 29:** Hairpeace - Guitar & vocal duo performing acoustic music from the 60's to today
<https://sevendaystickets.com/events/hairpeace-9-29-2024>
- **November 3:** Alicia Chapman, Oboe
<https://sevendaystickets.com/events/alicia-chapman-oboe-11-3-2024>

General link: <https://sevendaystickets.com/organizations/community-concerts-at-first-congregational-church>

Please mark your calendars, so you don't miss out! You can get tickets from the Seven Days website. Suggested donation \$20/pp, under 18 free. You will be pleased to know that a portion of the proceeds from each concert is donated to a community service organization.

Your CC@F Team,

Bill Bickford, Joanne Irwin, Alex John, and Gretchen Owens

First Congregational Church of Essex Junction
1 Church Street
Essex Junction, VT 05452
Phone: 802-878-5745
Email: welcome@fccej.org

ELECTRONIC SERVICE REQUESTED

Sunday Morning Worship:

~First Sunday of Each Month~

One Service at 10am

with Holy Communion and Sanctuary Choir

~Other Sundays Throughout the Month~

8:30 - In-person and streamed via youtube.com/c/fccej

Music: Bethany Blake directs our Sanctuary Choir and provides accompaniment

10:15 - In-person—Faith Formation for PreK - 8th

Music: Finally @ First Praise Band

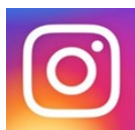
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