

We have just marked a milestone in this pandemic... Last year, March 15th was our first 'ONLINE WORSHIP' service ever! Since that time we have been faithful in providing meaningful worship through seasons of Lent & Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, Advent, Christmas & Epiphany. In fact, if you've been a faithful worshipper with us, you've noticed a progression in the quality of the online presentations. One year in, we can honestly say that the vital signs of worship are strong, and improving. We have devised ways of safely providing Handbell practice and recording. We've secured equipment to keep our singers safe as they rehearse together & record within the guidelines and protocols. Soon, we will begin training and learning to operate the new livestream system in anticipation of gathering for worship once again.

We began this transformational season re-focusing on our call to be signs of God's kin-dom on earth. Transformation is change. We are called to be changed within our hearts and to be agents of change promoting the love of God. In this fourth week journeying together, how is it with your soul? What are the vital signs keeping this a 'holy' Lent? How is your journey of the heart progressing?

Our scriptures for today help us focus on the vital signs of a holy Lent – a season of reflection toward transforming, renewing and rehabilitating our heart focused on the covenant God has with us.

I give thanks to Ms Jelinda, and for her grandson's snake... They really helped us think about what it means when we grumble, complain and forget what God has done for us and what God is doing and what God promises.

In fact, this story, from the book of Numbers is not the first time we hear about grumbling in the bible. Did you know (a fun fact) this is the fifth occasion about grumbling in the book of Numbers. In every case, God's people complain about the current situation, how dissatisfied they are with the food, the water, the leadership, their comfort, even to the point of wanting to return to their OLD NORMAL lives as slaves. They are tired; they are weary of challenging conditions. Can anyone relate? (AMEN)

Critical in the complaining & grumbling is the condition of their hearts. They forget the promise and provision of God, they rebel. They forget how far God has led them through God's appointed leader Moses; they think they can do better on their own. Can anyone relate? (AMEN)

Let me remind us all that at one point Moses had led God's people to within 1 mile of the Jordan River and the Promised Land, yet the people grumbled, complained and were fearful.

Once again, the hearts of the people were sin-sick with unfaithfulness, untrusting, and ungratefulness.

Here's another fun fact for you... the Snake on the pole has a name – Nehushtan (2 Kings 18:4). When the new King Hezekiah cleans the temple of all the ungodly/unholy practices of worship, he has it the bronze snake destroyed because the people were bringing offerings to it...as if it were a deity to idolize.

Vital Signs are important. Vital (rooted in vita = life in Latin) + Sign (provides direction or idea or command; communicates idea) are indicators of the state of essential body functions in a living being. These vital signs include body temperature, heart rate (pulse), breathing (respiratory) rate, and blood pressure, as well as measurements of height and weight, and oxygen saturation. But basic four are temp, pulse, BP & Respirations. Together they show how well the body is functioning. From an early age, we learn about taking a pulse, temperatures, breathing & blood pressure. We experience these measurements as routine care when at a doctor's visit, a hospital or in Emergency. We know how important these signs of life are as we assess the ABC's airway, breathing, and circulation when helping someone in a possible health crisis.

We are used to measuring vital signs for our bodies and our minds (mood, energy, focus, motivation). Well, there are vital signs for our spiritual journey, as well. Let's think on this and what healthy vital signs on spiritual journey of the heart looks like.

In the first reading Mary Anne shared with us today, Paul outlines what it looks like to have poor vital signs... you were like a dead person. Acting like the most people in the world, following destructive spiritual power, having a spirit of disobedience...doing what felt good, whether or not it was right in God's eyes. A simple measure might be considering the essential laws, commands given by God and through Jesus' teachings.

...honoring God, worshipping only God (not money, power, fame, status or position); loving God's people, including parents, neighbors; not stealing or being jealous of another/comparing yourself to others; not lying or misrepresenting the truth/facts for your own gain; willfully harming someone or a group of people.

Paul puts the challenge of a healthy spiritual heart in good news this way... However, God is rich in mercy. You are saved by God's grace... God's unmerited, never-can-earn-it love for you and for me... because of your faith.

In the bible, faith is understood to be trust, rather than belief. Moses didn't ask the people to believe in the snake, but that the people TRUST God would do what God promised when they looked at the snake on the pole.

As we heard in the gospel passage, Jesus recalls this story of salvation and relates it to his mission... that he will be lifted up on the cross so that all who look and trust in him will have eternal life.

The clear intention of the cross is salvation for those who TRUST in Christ.

The vital signs are clear: live in the light, trust in God and follow the way of Jesus... loving God and loving God's people as you love yourself.

How are the vital signs of your spiritual heart? Just as there are lifestyle changes to improve our body & mental health, there are lifestyle changes to improve our spiritual heart health. How much time do you spend with God? How often do you read scripture? How often do you have conversation with others who trust in God? How do you use your time for others in need? How do you spend your money? How do you serve the needs of the church in mission & ministries & in leadership?

In other words, since beginning this Lenten journey, how have you been intentional in meeting God and allowing Spirit to work within you to change your heart? Have you let God in and trusted God more?

The good news is that God loves, forgives and is ready to abide within you more and more. God planned for these good things. Will you trust God through Jesus Christ to do good within you... to walk with you to perfect you in Christian love?

In this Lenten season we journey with Christ to the cross, humble, broken, and renewed for love and serving all in God's kin-dom.

We are on a journey of the heart, focusing on the covenant God has made with us. We seek transformation, renewal, and rehabilitation of our hearts certain that Jesus will teach us, guide us, and comfort us along the way. Just as he promises. And so we sing a prayer in this season, listen and then sing along as we move into our prayer time.

**O Lord, hear my prayer, O Lord, hear my prayer
When I call answer me**

O Lord, hear my prayer, O Lord, hear my prayer, Come and listen to me.