



Serve & Enrich
Zion United Church
of Christ

LENT 2026
GIFTS OF THE
DARK WOOD

Our Mission: United by Christ's loving embrace, a welcoming light in an unsure world, we serve and enrich the community and provide a safe gathering space for fellowship, spiritual growth, and self-exploration.

Our Vision: Transforming and caring for our community through Christ's love.

Pastor: Sarah Frische-Mouri Hannigan

Organist: Martha Main

Bell Choir Director: Vivian Thomas

Office Manager: Michael Brown

Custodians: Anita and Greg Law

Scripture Reader:

Tech Steward:



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February 18, 2026 – Ash Wednesday: Where We Find Ourselves

Prelude

Gathering

with There's a Path, verse 1

*There's a path... though it winds its way through darkness
We would choose... to avoid it if we could
We awake... to an unexpected calling
God says, "come... there are gifts in the Dark Wood"*

Centering Thoughts

*There's a path... though it winds its way through darkness
We would choose... to avoid it if we could
We awake... to an unexpected calling
God says, "come... there are gifts in the Dark Wood"*

Prayer—God, Creator, Jesus, Teacher, Spirit, Guide, open us to the possibility that even—or especially—in the midst of difficulty, loss and uncertainty we can find greater depth, deeper connection, and clearer vision. Calm our fears open our eyes guide our feet.

The Lord's Prayer (unison)—**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us**

Hymn

Precious Lord, Take My Hand, 500

We Respond to God's Word with Our Giving

Invitation—When the storms of life are raging, when we feel lost and uncertain, Jesus reaches out to us, offering the gift of presence, the gift of courage, the gift of grace. Because of the wondrous gifts we have received, let us give generously back to God the gift of our time, our talent, our resources, and our very lives.

February Benevolence

Chicago, United, and Eden Seminaries (CUE)

Ministry Moment

*Doxology

We Give Thanks—God, take these humble gifts and use them for your work in this world. May these gifts embolden us, here at Zion, to courageously follow your lead and walk the path you set before us. May they be signs of hope and comfort and peace to all those touched by your work through our church. Amen.

Special Music

Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God

The Ritual of Ashes

Hymn

Throughout These Lenten Days and Nights, 250

A Blessing—You have a place in this world; a place where everything comes together in your body and you disappear into a seamless whole. May you overcome whatever brings you fear and inhabit this world with your fullest self.

May the Spirit of the Living God, made known to us most fully within life's Dark Wood: Go before you to show you the way; Go above you to watch over you; Go behind you to push you into places you may not necessarily go yourself; Go beneath you to uphold and uplift you; Go beside you to be your strong and constant companion; And dwell within you to remind you that you are surely not alone, and that you are loved—loved beyond your wildest imagination. And may the fire of God's blessing burn brightly upon you, and within you, now and always. Amen.

Sung Benediction

There's a Path, verse 2

*There's a path... and it leads us out together
To the wood... where the darkness hovers still
We are sent... and the Spirit goes before us
God says, "go... be my presence in the world."*

Postlude

Series based on *Gifts of the Dark Wood* by Eric Elnes. All liturgy by Marcia McFee, www.worshipdesignstudio.com. “There’s a Path” words by Marcia McFee, music by Chuck Bell.

LENT AT ZION UCC

- **LENT**—Our Lenten Worship Series this year is based on the book *Gifts of the Dark Wood: Seven Blessings for Soulful Skeptics (and Other Wanderers)* by Eric Elnes. The series is about “seeing life through new” eyes, recognizing that experiences of failure, emptiness, and uncertainty are as critical for finding our way through life as they are unavoidable.” We will see how experiences of life through the “dark wood” are actually clues to our “calling” or “life path.” How can the struggles of life be the seedbed of spiritual awakening to the fulness of life?
- **MIDWEEK LENTEN WORSHIP**—The Worship Team is once again offering Midweek Lenten Worship online. Check your email each Wednesday morning for the link to a short service of scripture, song, and contemplation.
- **MATTHEW SMALL GROUPS**—The Faith Formation Team invites everyone in the church to join one of the small groups that will be reading through the Gospel of Matthew. The Young Adult Group began their small group on February 10 and will meet on Tuesdays at 6:30 pm on Zoom during Lent. Another Zoom small group will be offered on Thursdays during Lent, starting on February 19 at 7 pm. An in-person group will be offered on Tuesdays from 1-2:30 pm starting in April at Paula’s house. We hope this will be a nurturing practice that not only strengthens our spirits but deepens our relationships with each other.