



*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.

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**February 22, 2026 – The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent: The Gift of Uncertainty**

## 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**—Unexpected Love, enter our lives and open us to the gifts residing deep within the Holy Darkness of our lives. Walk with us, speak to us, call to us.

**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 this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.**

**And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

**Hymn**

*Take My Life and Let It Be, 466*

### **A Litany of Confession**

One: For giving fear too much face-time,

**Many: Forgive and restore us, O God.**

One: For digging in rather than going with the flow,

**Many: Forgive and restore us, O God.**

One: For holding on too tight when what we need to do is let go,

**Many: Forgive and restore us, O God.**

### **Assurance of Grace**

One: Hear these words of assurance: God dwells with us, no matter how sure or unsure we are. God is not uncertain about whether or not we are worthy of love. God is with you, forgiving and restoring you to wholeheartedness.

**Many: Thanks be to God! Amen!**

### **Bell Choir**

#### **We Hear God's Word**

*1 Corinthians 13:8-13 (NRSVUE)*

<sup>8</sup> Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup> For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

#### **Reflection**

*The Gift of Uncertainty*

**A Time for Reflection**— Each week we will take time to reflect, accompanied by music. This week, you are invited to write something you are uncertain of or worried about on a slip of dissolving paper and bring it forward, dropping it into the water and stirring it while it dissolves—a sign that our uncertainty is met by trust in God's presence—a true gift of the Dark Wood.

**Hymn**

*Day by Day, 449*

## **We Respond to God’s Word with Our Giving**

**Invitation**—We never know what tomorrow may bring. There are few certainties in life, but today we bring our humble offerings to God, trusting that it is at work in this world, in our lives, and in this ministry here at Zion.

**February Benevolence**

*Chicago, United, and Eden Seminaries (CUE)*

### **Ministry Moment**

#### **\*Doxology**

**We Give Thanks**—God, we entrust these gifts to you, knowing that you will find a way to use them for the goodness of your people. We ask your blessings upon these gifts and pray for a spirit of discernment as you work through our ministry together and our very lives. Amen.

### **Hymn**

*‘Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus, 442*

**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 shortcomings afflict you 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](http://www.worshipdesignstudio.com). “There’s a Path” words by Marcia McFee, music by Chuck Bell.

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### THIS WEEK AT ZION

- Sunday, 9 am – Bell Choir
- Sunday, after worship – Congregational Meeting
- Monday, 6:30 pm – Care Team (Zoom)
- Tuesday, 6:30 pm – Young Adult Matthew Study (Zoom)
- Wednesday – Midweek Lenten Worship (Online)
- Thursday, 7 pm – All Church Matthew Study (Zoom)
- Sunday, March 1, after worship – First Sunday Fellowship

### ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **CONGREGATIONAL MEETING**—Council invites you to join us for our February Congregational Meeting this Sunday after worship. We will receive our Annual Reports and share updates from the council.
- **TIME CHANGE**—Don't forget to Spring Forward on Sunday, March 8.

### SERVE

- **FEBRUARY BENEVOLENCE: Chicago, United, and Eden Seminaries (CUE)**—The CUE regional seminary support program brings together over 2,000 United Church of Christ churches in mid-America in support of our three UCC seminaries of the region. The goal of this offering is to support our seminaries in equipping prophetic and compassionate leaders for ministry.

### ENRICH

- **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 meets Tuesdays at 6:30 pm on Zoom. Everyone in the church is invited to join us Thursdays at 7 pm. Zoom links are included in the weekly email each Saturday. 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.
- **LENT**—Lent begins February 18. Join us for Ash Wednesday Worship at 7 pm, either in-person or online. 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.
- **FIRST SUNDAY FELLOWSHIP**—The Care Team invites you to stay after worship on March 1 to enjoy donuts and fellowship. Catch up with your friends. Get to know folks better. Enjoy some time together in community.

### A SPECIAL INVITATION

As part of Zion’s strategic plan, this fall we plan to open the Zion United Community Center to the wider community through a rental program. This initiative is vital to our mission of service and outreach.

To ensure we launch this program in a way that is legally compliant, financially sound, and operationally ready, Council is looking for **3 dedicated members** to serve on the Community Center Task Force.

Key responsibilities include:

- **Policy Development:** Drafting building use policies and rental agreements.
- **Regulatory Compliance:** Working with legal, accounting, and insurance agents on IRS compliance and liability.
- **Facility Strategy:** Partnering with the Building Task Force to identify and prepare rental spaces.
- **Operational Staffing:** Defining roles to oversee daily rental operations.

You won’t be alone in doing this! Council and Pastor Sarah will be available as active resources to provide guidance, historical context, and support throughout the process.

Why Join? By serving on this task force, you are playing a foundational role in Zion’s future. If you have a heart for community outreach or a background in policy, finance, or operations, we would love to have your voice at the table.

Let’s work together to make the Zion United Community Center a vibrant space for all!