***Embracing the uncertain***

**Lenten Worship Series – Week 1**

***The Uncertainty of Faith***

**March 1, 2020**

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| **WORSHIP SERVICE OUTLINE**S  Each worship outline contains all elements needed for your worship service. The order of each service presented is only a *suggestion*. No doubt changes will be needed to accommodate the flow and worship style of your corps. The outlines are flexible and allow opportunities to “cut and paste” as needed. If you are blessed with instrumental or vocal music resources, you may find there is more structured material here than needed. Sermon manuscripts are included as a *sample* and not to be preached verbatim. |

***The Uncertainty of Faith***

**Call to Worship:**

Just turning on the news shows that we live in uncertain times. Economic instabilities, eruptions of violence, and natural catastrophes can alter the lives and landscapes of entire communities. Our individual lives are often just as unsteady: relationships can break, plans can falter, and confidence can fail. Most of us find uncertainty to be uncomfortable, preferring stability and a predictable future to an unknown fate. We are wired to want to control our destiny. *Embracing the Uncertain*, our theme for our Lenten series, invites you to take a different perspective. Instead of ignoring or hiding from life’s uncertainties, you can engage them with confidence and find a stronger faith along the way.

(*Embracing the Uncertain*, back cover)

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| **HC#209 – Come People of the Risen King** | HC-209 | HCD19-T19 |
| **Additional Optional Songs** | | |
| **SB#26 – Great is Thy faithfulness** | TB-641 – same | HTD1-T10 (3 vs.) |
| **SB#55 – Praise, my soul, the king of Heaven** | TB-406 – Praise, my soul | HTD2-T12 (3 vs.) |
| **SB#277 – Thine is the Kingdom, Lord** | TB-162 – Diademata | HTD1-T8 (4 vs.) |
| **SB#819 – O Church, arise**  **HC#202 – O Church, Arise** | TB-777 – same  HC-202 | No CD  HCD19-T12 |
| **SB#861 – In Christ alone**  **HC#149 – In Christ Alone** | TB-132 – same  HC-149 | No CD  HCD13-T19 |

**Choric Reading**

**Reader 1:** Doesn’t it feel like just yesterday that we celebrated Jesus’ birth? Hasn’t it felt like just a few weeks since we took down our Christmas trees and sent off our thank-you notes? Today we begin our Lenten journey. Advent and Lent portray two very different ways of following Jesus. Advent calls us to the comforts of life and light; Lent calls us to reflect with humility and penitence. Most of us find it easier to celebrate the comfort and hope of Jesus’ birth than to risk the way of the cross. We tend to gravitate toward the Advent mode of following Jesus:

**Reader 2:** We easily and gladly claim love, joy, peace, and hope when times are going well. But we cannot predict with any certainty the timing or severity of the chaos that is sure to greet us down the road.

**Reader 3:** We often celebrate the Advent of Christ in our lives, while ignoring our need to be crucified with him.

**Reader 4:** We can believe with certainty the constant faithfulness and love God has given to us through Christ. But we are blind to the sin that festers and blooms within the subsoil of our existence.

**Reader 1:** We can trust with absolute conviction what God has done for us through Christ. But we can be much more reluctant in determining what we can do for God in the name of Christ.

**Reader 2:** We can live as secularized Christians, or what John Wesley would call “Almost Christians,” in which celebration is a given but discipline is elusive. In that case, a life of mere good deeds and a life of sincere, righteous faith are worlds apart.

**Reader 3:** Lent is an invitation for us to engage life’s uncertainties, not ignore them. It is only by embracing the uncertain that we can fully acknowledge the power and the proof of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday.

**Reader 4:** May this Lenten journey be for you an invitation to look deeply within yourself, to determine what resides in the uncertain—in the shadowy, untenable, and unreliable parts of your soul.

(*Embracing the Uncertain*, pp. 9-12)

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| **SB#499 – It is Jesus I need** | TB-703 – It is Jesus | HTD12-T9 (2 vs.) |
| **Additional Optional Songs** | | |
| **SB#376 – King of kings, majesty**  **HC#219 – King of Kings, Majesty** | TB-722 – same  HC-219 | No CD  HCD20-T19 |
| **SB#498 – I want the faith of God** | TB-159 – Trentham | HTD8-T17 (4 vs.) |
| **SB#492 – God will make a way**  **HC#65 – God Will Make a Way** | TB-639 – same  HC-65 | No CD  HCD5-T15 |
| **HC#122 – Bow the Knee** | HC-122 | HCD11-T12 |

**Reader 1:** Shall we pray:

**[Congregational prayer, please print in bulletin.]**

O God, help us to overcome our unbelief. Let the Holy Spirit fill us with the faith and power that rescue the prisoners enchained by the enemy. Make us people who pray. Make us people who believe. Make us like Jesus. Amen.

(NIV Worship Bible, p. 1355)

**Announcements and Offering**

***There Are No Ifs***

**Responsive Reading – Mark 9:14-29 (*The Message*):**

**Leader:** 14-16When they came back down the mountain to the other disciples, they saw a huge crowd around them, and the religion scholars cross-examining them. As soon as the people in the crowd saw Jesus, admiring excitement stirred them. They ran and greeted him. He asked, “What’s going on? What’s all the commotion?”

**All:** 17-18A man out of the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought my mute son, made speechless by a demon, to you. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and goes stiff as a board. I told your disciples, hoping they could deliver him, but they couldn’t.”

**Leader:** 19-20Jesus said, “What a generation! No sense of God! How many times do I have to go over these things? How much longer do I have to put up with this? Bring the boy here.” They brought him. When the demon saw Jesus, it threw the boy into a seizure, causing him to writhe on the ground and foam at the mouth.

**All:** 21-22He asked the boy’s father, “How long has this been going on?”

**Leader:** “Ever since he was a little boy. Many times it pitches him into fire or the river to do away with him. If you can do anything, do it. Have a heart and help us!”

**All:** 23Jesus said, “If? There are no ‘ifs’ among believers. Anything can happen.”

**Leader:** 24No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the father cried, “Then I believe. Help me with my doubts!”

**All:** 25-27Seeing that the crowd was forming fast, Jesus gave the vile spirit its marching orders: “Dumb and deaf spirit, I command you—Out of him, and stay out!” Screaming, and with much thrashing about, it left. The boy was pale as a corpse, so people started saying, “He’s dead.” But Jesus, taking his hand, raised him. The boy stood up.

**Leader:** 28After arriving back home, his disciples cornered Jesus and asked, “Why couldn’t we throw the demon out?”

**All:** 29He answered, “There is no way to get rid of this kind of demon except by prayer.”

***Embracing the Uncertain***

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**[Each week, *Embracing the Uncertain* is a time of silent prayer by the congregation. The leader should walk the congregation through the bullet points below.]**

**Leader:** Spend some time in prayer and express your doubts and your confidence in God.

* Pray that those doubts might eventually strengthen your convictions.
* Where there is uncertainty in your faith, ask God to deepen your faith.

**Prayer/or Pastoral Prayer**

God, thank you for grounding me with confidence and guiding me through doubt. I offer you my very best intentions to follow you, grateful for your grace and forgiveness when I falter and fall short. I believe; help my unbelief. Amen.

(*Embracing the Uncertain*, pp. 20-21)

**Testimony of Faith – [Choose someone from the congregation who can testify on this theme.]**

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| **Drama – Bumper-to-Bumper Warranty** |

**Message – Doubt**

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| **SB#848 – I’m in His hands** (chorus only)  **HC#167 – I’m in His Hands** | TB-659 – His way is best  HC-167 | No CD  HCD15-T17 |
| **Additional Optional Songs** | | |
| **SB#376 – King of kings, majesty**  **HC#219 – King of Kings, Majesty** | TB-722 – same  HC-219 | No CD  HCD20-T19 |
| **SB#565 – All I once held dear**  **HC#89 – Knowing You** | TB-725 – Knowing You  HC-89 | No CD  HCD7-T19 |
| **SB#630 – We have not known Thee as we ought** | TB-422 – Melita  TB-449 – Turner | HTD9-T11 (4 vs.)  No CD |
| **SB#634 – When from sin’s dark hold Thy love had won me** | TB-903 – Trust in God | No CD |
| **SB#645 – He leadeth me!**  **HC#32 – He Leadeth Me** | TB-14 – same  TB-8 – By His hand  HC-32 | HTD7-T19 (4 vs.)  No CD  HCD2B-T12 |
| **SB#769 – Jesus, see me at Thy feet**  **HC#98 – Nothing but Thy Blood** | TB-289 – Nothing but Thy blood  HC-98 | HTD11-T7 (4 vs.)  HCD8-T18 |
| **HC#122 – Bow the Knee** | HC-122 | HCD11-T12 |
| **SB#699 – Every promise we can make**  **HC#207 – Grace Alone** | TB-640 – Grace alone  HC-207 | No CD  HCD19T17 |
| **HC#214 – Holy Spirit** | HC-214 | HCD20-T14 |
| **HC#254 – Lord, There Are Times** | HC-254 | HCD24-T14 |

**Benediction:**

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

(Hebrews 13:20-21, NIV)

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| **SB#26 – Great is Thy faithfulness** | TB-641 – same | HTD1-T10 (3 vs.) |
| **SB#819 – O Church, arise**  **HC#202 – O Church, Arise** | TB-777 – same  HC-202 | No CD  HCD19-T12 |

DeVega, Magrey R. *Embracing the Uncertain: a Lenten Study for Unsteady Times*. Abingdon Press, 2017.

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| **Lent 2020 – Week #1** | |
| **DRAMA**  **Bumper-to-Bumper Warranty**  **By Martyn Scott Thomas**  © Copyright 2019 by Martyn Scott Thomas. All rights reserved. Used by permission. | |
| **Topic:** | Faith |
| **Scripture:** | Mark 9:14-29 |
| **Synopsis:** | A mechanic talks to the owner of an auto repair shop about a job that is giving him difficulty. |
| **Characters:** | Jordan Abbott – owner of Abbott Automotive  Blake McDaniels – a mechanic |
| **Props/Costumes:** | Table or desk and chairs. Coveralls and ball cap for Blake, a work shirt and jeans for Jordan. |
| **Setting:** | Abbott Automotive |
| **Running time:** | 5 minutes |

[*Jordan is standing/seated behind the counter/desk.*]

**Blake:** [*enters*] Mr. Abbott, do you have a minute?

**Jordan:** Sure, Blake. What’s up?

**Blake:** How long have I been working here?

**Jordan:** About three years.

**Blake:** And in that time, do you think I’ve proven myself to be a decent mechanic?

**Jordan:** Decent? You’re one of the best. I’d even trust you with my wife’s car.

**Blake:** Thank you, Mr. Abbott. I really appreciate you saying that.

**Jordan:** Where’s this headed? You’re not leaving are you? If Gus Thompson is trying to steal you away from here, he’s going to have to go through me.

**Blake:** No, it’s nothing like that. I love it here. You’ve really taught me a lot about being a good mechanic.

**Jordan:** Then what is it?

**Blake:** Well, it’s that pick-up that came in this morning.

**Jordan:** Steve Blair’s? What about it?

**Blake:** I’m almost embarrassed to say.

**Jordan:** It can’t be that bad. He just brought it in for an oil change.

**Blake:** And a new tail light.

**Jordan:** So what’s the problem?

**Blake:** The tail light.

**Jordan:** What’s the matter? Don’t we have a replacement bulb in stock?

**Blake:** No. We have plenty.

**Jordan:** Then what is it?

**Blake:** I can’t seem to get it to work.

**Jordan:** Maybe it’s a bad bulb.

**Blake:** No, I tested it on the other side. In fact, both original bulbs are good.

**Jordan:** Was it in a crash? Is there damage to the socket?

**Blake:** No, everything is fine.

**Jordan:** How about the fuse?

**Blake:** I tested that and everything checks out. This really has me stumped. I mean, it seems like one of the easiest jobs, but I’ve already been working on it for over an hour. And I feel bad about billing that to Mr. Blair.

**Jordan:** No, we’ll just charge him the usual replacement fee. Unless, there’s something else going on.

**Blake:** What else could there be?

**Jordan:** I have an idea. Where’s the truck now?

**Blake:** It’s in bay three.

**Jordan:** Is it on the rack?

**Blake:** No, I brought it down after the oil change.

**Jordan:** Well, let’s get it back up there and take a look.

**Blake:** You want to put it on the rack for a tail light?

**Jordan:** That’s right. Are you 100% sure it’s not the bulb or the fuse?

**Blake:** Absolutely. Like I said, I’ve checked everything.

**Jordan:** How about the wiring?

**Blake:** [*confused*] The wiring? But the fuse is good . . .

**Jordan:** And the socket and bulb are good, so that leaves what’s in between.

**Blake:** [*realizing*] The wiring.

**Jordan:** And if we put the truck up on the rack, we can have an easier look at what’s going on. Oh, and we may have to pull some panels as well.

**Blake:** So much for an easy job.

**Jordan:** It still might be, but we won’t know until we have a good look.

**Blake:** How could I miss something so simple?

**Jordan:** It’s really not that simple. I’d guess most decent mechanics would be stumped by this; just like you were.

**Blake:** But how did you know?

**Jordan:** Well, I don’t know for certain yet. That’s why we need to take a closer look.

**Blake:** Even so, how did you know where to look next?

**Jordan:** Blake, you can work on cars every day and never come across something like this. But, when you’ve been around as long as I have, there aren’t many things you haven’t seen. There’s a reason you’re a mechanic and I’m the shop owner.

**Blake:** Yeah, I guess you’re right.

**Jordan:** Of course I am. Now, [*turns to exit*] let’s see if we can’t get that tail light working.

**Blake:** [*follows*] Yes, sir.

[*Blackout*]

*\*Leader segues:*

No matter how experienced we are, sometimes our experience is not enough and we must turn to an expert. In this sketch, the mechanic’s experience was not enough to help him solve the issue with the tail light and he needed his boss’s expertise. In today’s scripture reading, the disciples could not cast the demon out of a young boy and the father had to turn to Jesus for his son’s healing.

***Embracing the Uncertain***

**Lenten Sermon – Week 1**

***Doubt***

**March 1, 2020**

by Rev. Debbie Casanzio

[Based on *Embracing the Uncertain*, by Magrey R. deVega

Chapter 1: *The Desperate Father and the Uncertainty of Faith*]

**Scripture:** Mark 9:14-29

Here we are in our first week of our Lenten series. It’s this season when we are going to journey to Easter together and intentionally reflect on our lives and our faith as we find our way to the resurrection story of Jesus. Our series is entitled, “Embracing the Uncertain,” based on a book by Rev. Magrey deVega.

Each week in our worship series we are going to look at the different stories that we see in scriptures, focusing on the characters to see how they become “signposts” for us in the Gospel narratives. He writes this in his book:

“It’s only by embracing the uncertain that we can fully acknowledge the power and the proof of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday. It is at the empty tomb that we discover that the ground has settled, our footing is sure, and that there is only one source for a firm foundation upon which to build our lives” (*Embracing the Uncertain,* p. 12).

The title of this first sermon is, “The Desperate Father and the Uncertainty of Faith,” and there are two words that struck me: 1) Father and 2) Certainty. They made me think of my dad, because he’s an engineer, and life was all about certainty in our household. He would say, “As a scientist, there are mathematical formulas that could provide measureable probability for successful outcomes.” And that’s how we got to live and make decisions in our home—yes we did! Except that he also lived in a household with three creative, spirit-filled, feminine energies floating around. And for him, certainty often went out the window! He would say we became his good spiritual teachers. I guess it’s not a wonder that he cultivated his faith as he tried to make sense of all the uncertainty that we seemed to bring into his life.

Today we have a story with a father who steps into the uncertainty of his faith as well. But for him, the circumstances are a little more desperate. The story opens up and we’ve got the disciples and the scribes and they’re arguing. Apparently, we’re told, as the father steps forward that it’s because he’s asked them to heal his son and they didn’t seem to be able to do so.

When we look at this story, we could look at it from many different lenses. We could look at it about the healing that happens to the boy, or what was going on with the boy. Or we could look at it from the lens of those disciples and scribes—what were they arguing about? Why was Jesus so frustrated with them? But today, I thought we might look at the desperate father, and that famous line that we heard read (Mark 9:24), “I believe; help my unbelief.”

There are two things that struck me about this story: 1) The father had doubts. 2) He was able to appeal to Jesus for help—help with his unbelief.

We have no idea what the measure of faith is of this father when he comes up to these disciples. Jesus had been doing a whole lot of healing in the area with lots of miracles happening (loaves and fishes)—did the father know of this or had he heard of these stories? Scripture doesn’t say. It tells as that he did come, and the text is clear that he came seeking healing, but he also came with doubts. He was a man willing to step into the uncertainty of his faith and to ask Jesus for help.

Doubts and questions are good—especially when it comes to our faith—and I don’t see why it gets such a bad wrap. Doubts and questions can help us to find answers and can help us to release our need for certainty. Look at the characters throughout scriptures—they’re continually wrestling with their faith from generation to generation. Jacob wrestled with his faith; Moses questioned God a lot; and the disciples—there they are, journeying with Jesus and learning what it looks like to live out this life of faith and they ask questions and they’ve got doubts. All the time they are reasoning with their minds, “What does this mean?”

Anne LaMott has this wonderful quote: “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty.” The truth of it is, more often than not, living in certainty can really stink, can’t it? I like ot have answers. Knowing improbability can be very comforting, can’t it? We certainly like it with our faith. Wouldn’t it be easier if we had all the answers? If they were clearly written in languages we could understand, wouldn’t that be much more helpful?

I believe that it’s not always our answers that most transform us. But it is our doubts and questions and even our fears, when we open ourselves up to discover the deeper truths that live within ourselves and our relationship with God.

We are a people who are continually seeking our understanding of scriptures and what it looks like to live out this faith together. We even have a good process that helps us understand our faith. It’s kind of like a “wind chime.” The base of the wind chime represents scripture. Scripture—the story of God that is unfolding through time into this ongoing relationship with humanity. With scripture at its base, there are three “chimes” that hang off of it: 1) reason, 2) tradition, and 3) experience. The “ball” that fits in the center of that chime is us. The idea is that when we allow the wind of the Spirit to move through us—to bounce off of tradition and reason and experience as it is grounded at the base of scripture—then our doubts and questions can transform and they become music of our faith as we live into it. This metaphor allows us to embrace the uncertainty and to discover the music of faith that lives within us as we reach out to God for help and explore it together in community with others.

I am so inspired to hear stories about the way God has been at work in your lives as you wrestle with and struggle through questions in life that is uncertain. Believing in God is an ongoing process. A woman shared how her faith became stronger as she confronted brain cancer—twice. She said she grew deeper in her faith during that time. She began to see gratitude like never before. It was interesting because she said that her faith grew not because she got the results she wanted, but her faith grew living in the uncertainty of it all that her faith was deepened. She said her “go to” verse was Hebrews 11:1 (NIV): *“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”*

So what about you? Is there a place in your life that you need to release your need for certainty to move towards Jesus this Lenten season?

Dealing with our doubts and disbeliefs can be challenging—if not painful—at times. Embracing the uncertainty of doubt is an opportunity we all get to live into in our lives. When we embrace our doubts and appeal to God for help with our uncertainty, it’s then that we open ourselves up to be changed. We can even change our world. I believe that embracing this life with Jesus has the power to change us in the way that we live and the way that we love and the way that we can impact this world.

Hearing the news and looking at the television images of shootings, hatred, and violence, it causes many of us to question our beliefs as we struggle with the circumstances around us. Even among people of faith there is differing views of how we deal with the issues in the cycle of violence. People differ on the impact laws have on their rights versus the safety of others. It can leave us all feeling powerless and frustrated. In the meantime, there are families that are grieving, communities in shock and all that live in the midst of that uncertainty.

“In an uncertain world I am certain of this: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit present with me always. When my faith falters I turn to God who uses my doubts to draw me closer and deepen my faith. In all things—even in uncertainty—I surrender my life and my will to God who loves and cares for me always and forever.” (Youth of Hyde Park UMC, following shooting at Florida High School in 2018)

Faith is about a daily choice to walk in the presence of God, regardless of our circumstances or outcomes that we get in this life. We all deal with the uncertainties of life, don’t we? We seek courage to believe in the places in which we cannot see.

For two years, I got to experience this passage in reverse, actually. It was my desperate father that was living in the uncertainty of life. His cancer had returned again, and after many years of treatment, it wasn’t working. I watched him step into uncertainty and trust God despite the inevitable outcome. To tell you the truth, I didn’t like living in the uncertainty then. I wasn’t ready and I wanted more time. I wanted to run at the pain of potential loss, and I wanted to stay as busy as I could so that I didn’t have to feel so desperate about my doubts and fears. But as I spent time with God in prayer, I reached out and said, “Help me not run. Help me not stay so busy.”

And this time I didn’t. I stayed and I noticed the mess and lived into the discomfort and felt the emptiness and wrestled with my doubts. I trusted in God’s strength as we served and loved him until he took his last breath. You know what I discovered? It didn’t crush me! Instead, that mess became gratitude, and the emptiness became inspiration, and my doubt a deeper faith.

Renee Brown says: “Faith is a place of mystery where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see, and the strength to let go of our fear of certainty.”

Like the man in the story, I needed courage to believe in what I couldn’t see, and I needed strength to weather the uncertainty. What about you? Are there places in your life where you need the courage to believe? Or maybe you need strength to let go of your fears of uncertainty?

As we embrace the uncertain together in this Lenten season, it is our prayer that the presence of God may deepen your faith, strengthen your hope, and bring all of us courage—courage to believe where we cannot see.

I’d like to close with a prayer written by Thomas Merton. It’s a prayer that has guided many over the years. Hear these words of hope in the midst of our doubts and uncertainty:

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Amen.

(From Thoughts in Solitude, 1956)

Recorded: February 20, 2018

Hyde Park United Methodist Church

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