

*do not fear, for I am with you,  
do not be afraid, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.  
Isaiah 41:10*

**What we do as a church matters. What we are doing as a church will make a difference.**  
*That is what I want you to hear.*

In a world that is often dark and painful, we hope to see some light. We hope to feel the warmth of love and kindness and real connection with others when life seems to be crashing in around us. When we hit a dead end, we hope to find forgiveness and a new start. We hope our children and their children will find meaning in a life that isn't always easy. We hope to see God, feel God, and know God.

**What we do as a church matters. What we are doing as a church will make a difference.**  
Last Sunday I said goodbye to one of our church kids who lost hope. He was only 18 when he took his own life. He was a freshman in college with a family who loved him. He had a future filled with so many of the dreams that make life worth living. But sometime last week, in the darkness of the night, he lost hope. Why? No one knows why. All we know is the pain and sadness of what might have been. He was one of my kids. He was one of your kids.

**What we do as a church matters. What we are doing as a church will make a difference.**  
That is what I said as I drove to church heartbroken this morning. The Pine Room is gone, but I can see where the courtyard with the fireplace will be. I can imagine what the Small Group East Room will look like as families hang out on Sunday mornings. I can see Sunday school kids running through the new Commons, laughing and knowing they are loved. I can see our high school youth gathered together and talking about life. I can hear worship choirs, singers, our organ, and our drums. I can see a place where people can come when life is easy and especially when life is dark. I can see a place where they marry the love of their life and baptize their children. I can see a place where they say goodbye to the ones they love most and a place that will support them in that loss. I can see a place where a young man who feels lost reaches out for help because we are his church family, and we remind him how loved he is.

**What we do as a church matters. What we are doing as a church will make a difference.** 2020 was one of the hardest years I have ever had as a pastor, but it was also one of the most exciting because of what we are building together. Our congregation is strong and bold. It is generous and loving. It has weathered a pandemic in strength, creativity, and the belief that WE are called to bring God's light and love in the darkness of this time.

I want to thank you all for what you have done! Thank you, my church family, for always going the extra mile. Thank you for your understanding and generosity, especially to those in need. Thank you for watching worship and reading our website and newsletter. Thank you for your messages of love and support. Thank you for helping to build a place where we can shine light and love into any darkness.

Thank you, staff, church council, and leaders. I know it's bragging, but we have the best people doing amazing work because they love God and they love our people. What you all have done matters. What you all have done has already made a difference.

We have 11 months to be the church apart until we are once again the church together. We are connected by love and faith. We are connected by the purpose of shining God's light. It will be hard. It will be challenging and fun and frustrating, but what we do TOGETHER will give hope to those who feel lost in the dark.

My friend Carter gave us a message as we move forward. You are not alone! You are loved by God. One of the last things he did before he died was to plan his service. He chose this scripture:

***do not fear, for I am with you,  
do not be afraid, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.  
Isaiah 41:10***

This is our call to love and action this year. This is how we will face the future and build our church. We will not be afraid. We will work to know and love God every single day. And God will give us strength to be lights that will shine his love into the very darkest of places.

You friend and pastor,  
Pastor Bill Knapp

