

On October 31, Halloween, my husband Mark and I turned on our orange lights over our front door and welcomed quite a few young spooks and goblins. At our old home in San Diego we didn't have any kids come trick or treating for several years. Here we gave out two Costco-size bags of candy. Then on the morning of November 4th - just a few days later, I received this text from my husband, Mark:

“Christmas is here! (exclamation mark - Christmas tree emoji). Starbucks converted their red holiday cups and a massive Christmas tree and decorations are up at the Crossings Mall by the fountain!”

Then later that afternoon on November 4, one of the new families in our congregation - very generously - came by our office with a gift for me for pastor appreciation - a mocha - in...yep, a Starbucks holiday cup. It seems we are officially in a NEW SEASON - the “holiday” season - at least commercially.

Well, as I've been preparing for our Stewardship Drive here at church this year called ONE STEP UP - and after studying our budget for 2022, I firmly believe Corona UMC is also in a NEW SEASON of ministry.

If you haven't noticed, since we've begun gathering for in person worship again July 11, signs of this new season have been all around us. Many have commented to me on the presence of more children in worship and Sunday School AND - As we print our weekly financial update in the bulletin every Sunday - in fact, look with me on your bulletin on the back - there is where you'll find where we are in giving compared to budget to cover our current needs. As we've printed this every week, maybe you have noticed that by your amazing generosity, we have actually been in the black two of the four months since July - in August and October. Thank you!! You are all truly remarkable by God's grace for accomplishing that goal.

In one sense we can say in those two months we met our budget needs. But in another sense we kinda didn't. That's because the organization that oversees all Methodist Churches in southern California - called the California-Pacific Conference - they've been giving us a grant since July to cover a large portion of my salary and benefits. Without it, I wouldn't be here with you today,

preaching this message about giving and stewardship - which maybe you'd be glad about.. - just kidding.

And in fact, it's also probably true that without the Paycheck Protection Program -otherwise known as the PPP - which many small businesses received, including our church during the Covid shut down - without that and a third small grant we received from the National Methodist church, it's highly likely this church wouldn't even have been able to continue providing online worship earlier in this year, much less have opened its doors again in July. So - by God's grace, we've been meeting our budget needs recently, sort of - with some help.

In this NEW SEASON we're experiencing as a church - we DO have that same helpful grant from Cal-Pac Conference this whole next year to help cover my salary. So if we all - including my husband and I - if ALL OF US who are willing and able, take just ONE STEP UP in our giving - however that makes sense to you - whether it's amount of money, or a percentage - if we ALL take ONE STEP UP in 2022 we'll be able to jump from covering costs half the time to covering costs All the time. (Deep breath) Wouldn't that be delightful, delicious, de-lovely.

MORE THAN THAT - our path as ones who seek to live in THE WAY of Jesus and have a daily, personal relationship with God - actually begs us to consider a whole different question regarding that difficult subject - money - which relates directly to our scripture lesson for today.

The 14th chapter in Genesis, which is common in the Old Testament - opens with a lot of difficult names to pronounce - King Amraphel, King Chedorlaomer, etc. Remember - if you ever come to a name in the Bible you don't know how to pronounce - just say with confidence your best guess and no one will know it might be incorrect.

But there is one very significant name I would like you to know more about from this passage in Genesis-even how to pronounce the name.

Melchizedek

Melchizedek is a little known person in the Bible. You might have never heard of him before. But he's a very important person. After today's sermon I hope the

Baptists won't have anything on us in terms of Biblical literacy. You know that old joke, right - how can you tell a Methodist from a Baptist standing on the street corner? A Baptist has a Bible under their arm and a Methodist has a casserole? It's very important for me, myself, to become more Biblically literate everyday and I'm going to bring you all along with me.

I'm going to talk about Genesis 14 verses 14 through 20 more now if you want to skip to that part. We already heard from Steve that Abram - who would later be renamed Abraham by God - the same person - Abram had a nephew very close to him named Lot. Now an alliance of four kings attacked and captured a coalition of five other Kings and their people including Abram's nephew, Lot. When Abram hears that Lot's been captured, he gathers together his best trained soldiers from his very large family and goes out to rescue him. Abram - As God's special servant called by God - unsurprisingly routes the ones who captured Lot and brings back not only his nephew, but all the goods the attackers had taken.

After the defeat, two leaders from the area Abram was protecting go out to meet Abram and congratulate him. One of them is an extraordinary person in the eyes of the Hebrew people. Look again at verse 18. Do you recognize why Melchizedek was an extraordinary person in this narrative? He was a king. King of what? Of Salem. Salem means peace or righteousness. So not just any king, but a king of peace or righteousness. And not ONLY a king of peace, but also a PRIEST of God most high. Both a king and a priest.

In the Jewish tradition, not until Saul did they have a king. In the beginning God gave them priests and then judges to oversee them and it wasn't until the people begged God to give them a king to rule them instead of God, like the other people around them, did God finally relent and give them - King Saul, then King David, then King Solomon and so on. But none of those kings - not Saul, not Solomon, not even David or any others - none of them were ever a king AND a priest of God most high.

You see it was the kings who ruled them, but it was the Most High Priest who interceded for them who -

in those days before Jesus - through the life blood of an unblemished/perfect animal sacrifice - made them at one in relationship with God again, restored them in relationship with God. Only the priest could do that. But there - in that brief moment of history given in Genesis in just a few verses Abram is in the presence of the king of peace AND a high priest - Melchizedek. This king and priest Melchizedek blesses Abram. Look in verses 19 & the beginning of verse 20.

(read 19 & 20a)

And at the end of that verse 20 is the next significant moment in our story of faith. In response - upon meeting Melchizedek, king of peace and priest - Abram gives him one-tenth of everything - Abram gives Melchizedek - King of peace and high priest - one-tenth of all the goods God put back in Abram's hand. And so the tradition begins. The Biblical response to an experience of prosperity is giving back one-tenth of those goods to God.

We hear it again in Genesis 28: 20-22 from Jacob, the grandson of Abram.

"Then Jacob made this vow, saying, 'If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on so that I come back to my Father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that you give me, O God, I will surely give a tenth back to you.'"

The significance of Abram's experience with Melchizedek is made even more clear in these new Testament verses in Hebrews chapter 7:1 - 4 "This King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him; and to him Abraham apportioned one-tenth of everything. His name, in the first place, means 'king of righteousness or peace'. Without father, without mother, without genealogy; having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. See how great he is! Even Abraham, the patriarch, gave him a tenth of the spoils."

You see - the early Christians realized from their Jewish upbringing that this King of peace and priest most high Melchizedek - who appeared in the scriptures

as if out of nowhere and shows no record of the end of his life - that Melchizedek resembled Jesus. In fact, Melchizedek was a foreshadowing of Jesus who became the King of our hearts and great high priest as he atoned for our sins by his own death on the cross - the perfect sacrifice.

Somewhere along the way, over time, this word "tenth" became the word "tithe". Tithe means tenth. So now in most Christian churches - protestant or Catholic - this word "Tithe" is a concept upheld and encouraged when discussing financial support of the work of the church.

So what does this all mean for us here in Corona in 2021, looking to 2022?

In your mail at home - you should have received this invitation to consider what your response will be to the blessings you have received - if you'd be willing to pledge a certain amount of your blessings back to God. ONE STEP UP? This is what your Finance committee requests as you help meet the budget needs for your church for next year. However that looks for you - if it means beginning to support your church financially or stepping up giving by an amount or a percentage. Or maybe consider a tithe? This is what the Bible and our tradition set before us not only today, but as we continue to live out our lives as the body of Christ in the world wherever we are.

What will your response be to the blessings in your life today?

Please, please consider participating in this important tool to help us plan for ministry next year - your pledge makes all the difference.

I invite you to fill this out before you leave today and place it in the beautiful offering box near the door in the back. Or take this home, pray and think about your response and return it to the church office in person or by mail or bring it to worship by next Sunday.

And thank you. Thank you for helping this church continue to meet for worship, Bible study, prayer and serve this community and all the world in the name of Jesus Christ.