

WELCOME

Thank you for coming!

We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us today

This is a sacred time, as we gather in community to open our hearts to God.

I invite you to light a candle,

As our candles are lit here in our sanctuary,

to remind us of God's presence with us,

and to set aside this as a time of worship for you.

Our service will be in voice and text.

Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have media turned on. .

There will be a link in Nearby Chat if you want to view the video in your own browser.

I'm going to start our Gathering Music and run the rest of the announcements underneath.

GATHERING MUSIC

"In the Lord" - The London Fox Taize Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjZsXCZX8f4>

Chorus (you may want to sing along):

In the Lord I'll be every thankful

In the Lord I will rejoice

Look to God, do not be afraid

Lift up your voices, the Lord is near

Lift up your voices the Lord is near

First United Church of Christ and Conference Center is a church with full real life standing in the Eastern Association; Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC).

And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

As we like to say, it's good to be real in Second Life!

And as a UCC church, we'd like you to know that

"No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

If you would like a bulletin for today's service you can find it in the red binder in the back.

If there are any other announcements about the life of the church, please type them in Nearby Chat at this time.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

Most churches have a time of offering.

Making an offering,

sharing what you can in God's name,

is a spiritual practice.

If you would like to make a financial offering to support this ministry

there is a donation bowl by the door to the sanctuary,

or you can go to our website:

firstuccsl.org

We thank you for the blessing of your presence and your support.

ADVENT WREATH - FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

(adapted from Maren Tirabassi)

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new liturgical year. Lighting candles on our Advent wreath is how we mark our progress through this season.

On the first Advent Sunday, we light one candle.

Each one of us comes to Advent and Christmas alone, weary or with worry, lonely, excited, confused, eager for old traditions or new experiences.

We light the one candle of hope,

(pause, light)

reminding ourselves

we embrace a season that is different

for each one of us.

Let us pray.

Emmanuel, God be with us, in the week to come.

Ignite hope, the most personal emotion there is,

on the wick of each of our lives, so we find others.

Amen.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

In the Revised Common Lectionary, Advent always begins with a word about wakefulness.

Today's lectionary word about wakefulness comes from Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

Today also marks the beginning of our Advent sermon series inspired by the book "This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation and the Stories that Make Us" by Cole Arthur Riley.

Cole is a writer, a poet, and currently serves as the spiritual teacher in residence at Cornell University.

She is also the creator of Black Liturgies, a project of the Center for Dignity and Contemplation.

Over the next 4 Sundays, I hope to weave some of Cole's rich writing with Advent scripture and other voices

To illuminate and play with this time when we are reminded to prepare for the new thing God is birthing in us and our world.

Let us listen to the Spirit speaking through the words of Romans, chapter 13, verses 8 through 14.

ROMANS 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another;
for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

The commandments,

"You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet";

and any other commandment, are summed up in this word,

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is,

how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.

For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;

the night is far gone, the day is near.
Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;
let us live honorably as in the day,
not in reveling and drunkenness,
not in debauchery and licentiousness,
not in quarreling and jealousy.
Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ,
and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

The Word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God!

“Wake up, Pay Attention”

Let us pray ...
Cole Arthur Riley begins the book her some of her own stories
By retelling a story by someone else that was important for her:
It's the story of Baby Suggs from Toni Morrison's novel, "Beloved."
"Baby Suggs, the matriarch, gathers all of her people in the Clearing.
Everyone is standing on the edges, waiting in the trees for her to begin to preach.
And she says, 'Let the children come,'
and they all scurry to the center, and she tells them,
'Let your mothers hear you laugh,' and they laugh.
And she calls the men to come down and says,
'Let your wives and children see you dance.' And they do.
And finally, she calls the women to the center and says,
"Cry...For the living and the dead. Just cry."
And without covering their eyes the women let loose.'
And they all get tangled up in each other,
and the men are crying, and the women are dancing, and the children are laughing,
until eventually, they all collapse in the grass together to hear Baby Suggs give a
sermon.
'In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare
feet in grass,' it starts.
Morrison writes, 'She did not tell them...to go and sin no more.'
She calls them to awaken to their stories.
And then she leads them in this sacred cry of the body."
Wake up, pay attention to the stories within you, to the stories around you.
Hear them, feel them, let them out,
In dance, in laughter, in tears,
In words that come from deep inside.
Find God there.
This is not, Cole writes, "a spirituality of disembodied, solitary intellectual
musing.
It is a way of being together in 'the Clearing' with God.
And we get there by descending into the stories that reside in our bodies."
Cole talks about how Black spirituality had to depend on paying attention to the
interior life, because the slave-owner,
"the oppressor has no power in those deep and secret places."
We all can learn from this.

After all, there are many kinds of oppression,
And many of us, too many of us, feel it's weight.
Racism, sexism, agism, ablism.
Homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia.
Not to mention the boots of consumerism and white male patriarchy that sit on all
our necks,
Even those of white males.
In these days it's tempting, oh so tempting, to check out, disconnect,
Numb ourselves with our pacifiers of choice,
Go to sleep.
But there is another way.
A contemplative way.
Wake up, pay attention.
It's not enough to just look,
Because as cognitive scientist Alexandra Horowitz tells us,
"Right now, you are missing the vast majority of what is happening around you.
You are missing the events unfolding in your body, in the distance, and right in
front of you."
By paying attention to my voice,
You are "ignoring an unthinkable large amount of information that continues to
bombard all of your senses,"
Like the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen,
or the feel of the chair as it supports your body,
or the tension in your shoulders or jaw,
or your cat stretching out next to you.
We have to do this to avoid cognitive overload and conserve our mental and emotional
resources for what is important.
"Attention is an intentional, unapologetic discriminator," Horowitz tells us.
"It asks what is relevant right now, and gears us up to notice only that."
And we are evolutionarily predisposed to focus on the bad stuff,
Which was the stuff most likely to kill us.
So we have to practice shifting our attention to other things,
Things like signs that God is here, on the move, at work
In you, through you, around you.
Wake us, pay attention and you will see
The signs will be revealed,
and you will have hope,
hope that cannot be taken from you.
This is how I hear the apocalyptic language of the early Advent scriptures,
Like the passage from Romans we hear today.
Paul sounds kind of like a First Century mindfulness coach.
Calling us to wake up, pay attention,
A call that comes right after Paul's exhortation to love one another, love our
neighbor.
After all, attention is a form and expression of love.
Paul wants us to pay attention to the present moment in which we are living.
Because the present is the only place where change can occur;
it's the place change is occurring, right now.
And, to paraphrase Frank Herbert's "Dune," without change something sleeps inside us
and rarely awakens.

“The sleeper must awaken.”

Not just to smell the coffee, but to awe and wonder at the sacred all around us. For Cole, “most simply, contemplative spirituality is a fidelity to beholding the divine in all things.

In the field, on the walk home, sitting under the oak tree that hugs my house. A sacred attention.”

Cole’s words echo those of fellow poet Mary Oliver

Who gave us “instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.”

Astonishment, awe, wonder.

“Awe,” Cole writes, “is an exercise, both a doing and a being.

It is a spiritual muscle of our humanity;

awe is not a lens through which to see the world but our sole path to seeing.

Any other lens is a veil;

seeing the veils of the world peeled back is no small form of salvation.”

“Wonder,” she says, “includes the capacity to be in awe of humanity, even your own.

Every second that our organs and bones sustain us is a miracle . . .

to be able to marvel at the face of our neighbor with the same awe we have for the mountaintop, the sunlight refracting—

this manner of vision is what will keep us from destroying each other,

in sacred awe, we are part of the story,

practicing wonder is a powerful tool against despair.”

Paying attention, waking up to see the world through the lens of awe and wonder

To see signs of the Spirit, moments of grace, the everyday sacred,

This is a tool of hope.

The hope of Advent.

To be clear, we’re not talking about big signs of God’s presence in the world,

Like the angelic choir that appeared to the shepherds on Christmas Eve.

Most often, we’re talking about things or moments that are almost, Cole says,

“illegibly spiritual.”

Let me close with a story Cole tells to explain what she means.

Cole writes:

“When I was twenty-two, I boarded an unreasonably small plane to Nome, Alaska, and went to volunteer with the annual Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

The historic trail, much of which was once a trade route for Alaska Natives, was made famous after mushers with teams of sled dogs raced a serum to a remote village in the pits of a diphtheria outbreak.

Now, each year, dozens of teams compete in a dogsled race to commemorate the journey from Anchorage to Nome.

I was working the lot overnight, scuttling around in the dark to keep my toes from turning to ice,

when the winning musher and team of dogs came tearing through the finish line. . . .

When I tell people I helped bed down the winning dogs of the 2014 Iditarod, their eyes get a particular shine to them.

It reads like quite the grand adventure for a Black girl from Pittsburgh.

And in its own way, it was.

But this is the story from Nome that has settled into my skin:

There I am, sitting on the porch of a rusting youth center with a friend and a local

Inupiaq girl
who can't have been older than twelve.
We ignore the brown snow-slush coating the porch as we kick our legs over the side
and brace our chins on the cold of the metal railing that wraps the perimeter of the
porch.
The girl is in the middle, holding her phone up like an offering,
and our cheeks are all but touching as we lean into the screen and watch one video
again and again—
a parody of Psy's 2012 hit "Gangnam Style"
that re-creates the entire song's music video using the game Minecraft, changing the
iconic chorus to "Minecraft style."
To our right, the frozen expanse of the Bering Sea.
Above us, powder leaks from the sky.
And three very different humans squeal and pitch our voices two octaves too low as
we sing out "Minecraft Style"
like it's as important as "Ave Maria."
This I will not forget.
Lips cracking, bellies burning, snow sliding down my pants as I rocked back in
laughter.
It was one of those rare occasions that I knew was becoming a part of me as I lived
it.
The moment wasn't just happiness, though that was a quality of it.
It was a kind of pleasure that made me feel a part of something—where beauty meets
belonging.
When I talk about Alaska, no one really cares about this moment.
It's simple and childish.
To me, it was a miracle.
The northern lights are one thing,
but when I die, tell them that I went to Nome, Alaska,
only to find God in a Minecraft parody."
It is wonderful to find God in the sacred stories of scripture.
But, if we really listen to our own stories,
And the stories of our neighbors,
The stories told in words, yes, but also in laughter, and dancing, and tears,
If we look at ourselves and the world around us with astonishment, wonder, awe,
We will find God there,
And it will give us hope.
Wake up, pay attention.
Amen.

"Pay Attention" from Sister Act 2
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gVDFvrqiTMg>

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

I want to begin our time of prayer today with a prayer practice taught by Ignatius
of Loyola,
called "the Examen."
Ignatius was a strong believer of paying attention, particularly to the movements of
the Spirit within us.
There are a number of ways to do the Examen prayer, but this is one simple way.

Let's take a deep breath, let it out slow.
Another,
As we open our hearts to God in prayer.
You may want to close your eyes.
In your mind's eye picture the events of your life today,
Let it play out in your head as though it were a movie.
Look for, notice, moments of grace, of joy, of love, of connection,
Of pleasant surprise, of wonder, of astonishment.
Even in the smallest of things.
For example, I remember the feel of the sun on my skin through the window, as I lay
down on my bed.
Soft and warm.
Notice each of these moments today, and by noticing lift them to God in gratitude.
[Pause in silence]
Now gently bring yourself back to this time, this place, this gathering of souls.
I invite you, if the Spirit moves you, to type one moment you noticed in Nearby
Chat.
[Pause in silence]
To each of these prayers we say, Amen.

And now, if you have a prayer of joy or concern that you wish to lift to God,
and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, type it in Nearby Chat at
this time.
As people share their prayers in text
please read them prayerfully
and hold this space as sacred and safe
to open our hearts to God.
Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Lord hear our prayers.
Those voiced here today.
Those spoken only in the depths of our hearts.
Those for which we have no words.
We lift them all to you, O Lord,
with faith in your boundless love and grace.
And we pray together the words Jesus taught us, saying
Our Father who art in heaven
hallowed be thy name
thy kin-dom 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 kin-dom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY
Our worship is over

our ministry to the world is just beginning
the world is waiting
for you to wake up and pay attention,
Go in peace, come again in hope.
Amen.

“Wake up, Everybody” – Brandy, Mary J. Blige, Missy Elliott, Wyclef Jean, Ashanti
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZPusIeehQo>

GO IN PEACE