

WELCOME

Thank you for coming!

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

Pastor Jamie and I switched services this week because of our schedules.

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

"Changes" David Bowie

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BgF7Y3q-as>

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.

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 an 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.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

Today's lectionary scripture comes from the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible.

It is part of the narrative of the Hebrew people as they journeyed through the wilderness

after leaving slavery in Egypt.

Let us listen to God speaking through the words of Exodus, chapter 17, verses 1 through 7.

EXODUS 17:1-7 (NRSVUE)

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded.
They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.
The people quarreled with Moses and said,
“Give us water to drink.”
Moses said to them,
“Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?”
But the people thirsted there for water, and the people complained against Moses and said, “
Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”
So Moses cried out to the Lord,
“What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”
The Lord said to Moses,
“Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”
Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.
He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying,
“Is the Lord among us or not?”

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

"Roll with the Changes"

Let us pray . . .
Things change.
In the US the time changes this Sunday.
Spring ahead; turn your clocks ahead a hour. =
I really hate it when the time changes, just sayin'
Speaking of Spring
The seasons change, the first day of Spring is only a little more than a week away.
I'm sure soon we'll see the snow melt here on First UCC Island the leaves are turning.
Here on Second Life, that's within our control - or Pastor Jerome's control as he's the builder.
But often the changes that happen in our lives are out of our control, and I want to talk about how we think about and deal with that kind of change.
Because things change.
As I stumble through my sixth decade it's something that has been much on my mind.
I see and feel the changes that time has made on my body.
I can look back over the stages of my life that have brought me to this space, and look ahead and try to prepare for the stages to come.
And in the process, I've developed a profound sense of how life - all life - is change.
Change is, as the saying goes, the only thing that is constant.
And that's true whether we're talking about life at the cellular level or the cosmic

level - and everything in between.

It happens to people, to families, to human institutions like churches, to societies, and to animals and plants and planets.

Some change is positive,

We talk about it as growth, renewal, progress;
other change, not so much.

But change happens, whether we want it to or not.

Turn on the news and you can see change happening in real time.

Much of it unwelcome: Snow storms in California, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods
all natural agents of change.

Protests, elections, war

humans causing or reacting to change.

It's happening right now - as you sit here,

the biological processes in your body are working to effect change;

new technology is being created that will change how we function as a society - the next, smart phone, or automobile, or cancer cure, or nuclear weapon;

decisions are being made that may alter how we draw our maps or even change the face of the planet.

And the pace of that change is itself changing - almost exponentially.

Buckminster Fuller noticed that until around the year 1900 human knowledge doubled about every century.

By World War II, human knowledge was doubling about every 25 years.

Today, it's doubling about every 13 months, and with it comes change large and small.

That's staggering.

In a blink of an eye, the landscape of our lives can change.

I think, post-COVID, we are more aware of this,

Because our lives did change - almost between one heartbeat and the next when everything shut down.

For me, it helps to notice that while change is inevitable,

And often out of my control,

There are cycles and stages.

Some structure to the journey.

Like the cycle of seasons, and the liturgical year.

We may feel winters' chill, but the wheel will turn and we will feel spring's warmth and renewal again.

Like the stages of life.

Like the Israelites wandering through the wilderness, the great archetypal journey story of our faith.

And at each stage there is a pattern of loss and renewal,

because even renewal comes with inevitable loss.

I'm seeing this in real time with my grandchildren.

It's such a joy to watch them grow, develop.

But sometimes I miss the way they were just months ago.

How we deal with all this inevitable change, our attitude towards it, is a spiritual issue.

Is our theology, our understanding of God, and our relationship with God

sufficient to help us navigate all this change going on in us and around us?

Because when it's not, we end up like the Israelites,

grumbling and complaining and lost in the wilderness
over and over again.

Because, you know, it's not as if the Israelites didn't have a valid point, or a reason to grumble.

They were hungry, and needed food.

Then they were thirsty, and needed water.

So each time in their journey when things got difficult,

when their changed circumstances became too much,

they looked back with nostalgia at the good old days when they were in Egypt,

and had plenty of food and water to drink,

and they knew exactly what they had to do, everyday.

They focused on the loss of familiarity and security,

and not on the freedom they had gained.

They fought change, wanted to turn back the clock, even though that was impossible.

So rather than look for ways to thrive in this new landscape of their lives,

they became angry, even to the point of violence.

I think we are seeing a lot of that play out in our world today.

In the Fourth Century, St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote that

"Sin happens whenever we refuse to keep growing."

It's interesting, isn't it, that in the story we read today that's where the

Israelites were,

in the "wilderness of Sin,"

though, of course, "Sin" in Hebrew doesn't mean what "sin" means in English.

A Jewish friend of mine gave me a really interesting bit of contemporary Midrash on Numbers 33.

Midrash is a Jewish form of creative scriptural interpretation.

In Numbers 33 there is a list of the 42 stages of the journey of the Israelites in the wilderness.

Place names like: Rameses, Marah, and, yes, Sin.

Hazan Jack Kessler compiled a Midrashic or metaphorical translation of this list,

Based on the Hebrew meaning of the place names.

I'm going to read a few of them

You will hear it reads less like a list, and more like a story,

Or a map of the psycho-spiritual journey of the Israelites,

And you may find more than a few places where that journey echoes your own.

As you listen to these stages, let them wash over you

Pay attention to what stands out for you

And notice how that resonates with your own journey.

This reflects the stages of the journey up to the wilderness of "Sin" - where we met the Israelites in the scripture for today:

"The journeyed from "Trembling under a thundering Foreign power"

And rested at "Awareness of how temporary things are."

They journeyed from "Awareness of how temporary things are"

And rested at "Hope that we can find perfection amidst chaos."

They journeyed from "Hope that we can find perfection amidst chaos"

And rested at "Speaking freely before the hidden master."

They journeyed from "Speaking freely before the hidden master"

Which is before "Tower of strength causes growth"

And rested at "Bitterness."

They journeyed from "Bitterness"

And rested at "Many powers, 12 natural springs, 70 palm trees"
They journeyed from "Many powers, 12 natural springs, 70 palm trees"
And rested at "The sea at the end of everything"
They journeyed from "The sea at the end of everything"
And rested at the "Wilderness where the Moon Goddess reigns."
They journeyed from the "Wilderness where the Moon Goddess reigns"
And rested at "Banging on the gates to force a shift."
That's what "Sin" means in Hebrew: "Banging on the gates to force a shift" -
a change in the way things were.
This represents maybe a third of the 40 year journey.
And they remembered. Wrote it all down.
I imagine that they reading back over this list,
they could remember that no stage lasted forever,
although while they were there it may have felt that it would never end,
pleasant or bitter, the journey would continue
and there would be something else,
something new.
And at each stage, God was there.
What did Moses do when faced with a changed desert landscape and the changed
attitudes of the people?
He prayed. He turned to God.
He trusted God and God provided.
At each stage of the Israelites journey so far when they faced death,
God provided, often in unexpected ways:
waters parted, manna came from heaven and water from rock.
You'd think the Israelites would have learned from experience that God could be
trusted to be with them,
In the midst of the constant change,
but over and over they seemed to suffer from spiritual amnesia, crying
"Is the Lord among us or not?"
It's natural, I think, that when things are going well, we feel that God is with us.

But when times are rough, it can feel like God is very far away.
But again and again, the Bible teaches us that in times of hunger and thirst and
pain and loss,
in times of change,
God is there, with us, among us.
And if we look back over the stages of our life,
We can see the flow of our story,
where we journeyed, where we rested,
and see signs of God with us along the way.
And we can hold onto God, like Moses held onto his staff,
the same staff he held as the waters of the Red Sea parted,
and trust God will help us through whatever wilderness we find ourselves in.
This is how we can be resilient,
How, with God, we can roll with the changes.
Let's roll.
Amen.

"Resilient" Rising Appalachia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tx17RvPMaQ8>

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

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.
Amen

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Our worship is over
our ministry to the world is just beginning.
Go in peace,
come again in hope.
Amen.

And yes, I totally had to play this song.
Note how the styles have changed since this video.
"Roll with the Changes" REO Speedwagon
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTjN4kFgLn4>

GO IN PEACE