

As we gather together there is some technical information that most of you already know, but just in case someone doesn't:

The service will be in voice and text.

There is a copy of the service in the red book by the door to the sanctuary. You'll want to grab one of those if you need the YouTube links or want the lyrics for today's worship music.

Speaking of which, worship music will be in the media player.

Frequently in my worship service, folk end up dancing right here in the aisles or in the back of the sanctuary, so if the mood strikes you—I say go for it!

GATHERING:

Today's sermon revolves around the idea of blessings and their opposite—curses.

And when I think of curses, I think of this famous ring:

<https://youtu.be/4Yy0pPTrHlk>, ~A scene from \_The Fellowship of the Ring\_

WELCOME

Welcome to First United Church of Christ and Conference Center, Second Life.

We have official standing with the Eastern Association of the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ as a Real Life church located in Second Life.

And I still think that's pretty cool, because I have sat in South Central

Pennsylvania—I have sat in Northern Maine—

and I am currently sitting in Central Connecticut—

and I still think it's pretty cool that we can partner with my brothers and sisters and non-binary siblings all across the country

and all of you wherever you are!

Speaking of wherever you are:

"No matter who you are,

or where you are on life's journey,

you are welcome here."

Most churches have a time of offering.

Making an offering, sharing what you can in God's name, is a spiritual practice.

You can find out more about how you can engage in that practice below:

That offering can be one of prayer or of presence,

of work on behalf of the church doing things like reading scripture or serving on the board of directors,

of helping with any of the many things that are needed for the church to function, and/or, that offering can be one of money.

As a UCC church, we support the work of the wider church both with prayer and with donations.

And it's true that we don't have a physical building, but there are monetary costs for this ministry to function.

So if you would like to make an offering by participating in leading worship or social events,

or if you would like to become a member of this church,

let any clergy or staff member know.

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 if you prefer you can make a donation in RL currency on our website:

[www.firstuccsl.org](http://www.firstuccsl.org)

And since we are a 501(c)(3) public charity, monetary donations are tax deductible

in the U.S.

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

#### SCRIPTURE

Genesis 12:1-4

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.

#### SERMON "Curses"

The short passage we just heard is the very beginning of the Abrahamic Covenant—And I cannot understate the importance of the Covenant—the promises, the contract if you will—between Abraham and God.

As one Rabbi I know puts it:

"You understand that this topic has been a hot one for thousands of years – not because there is a question that God will fulfill this promise – but because it sometimes takes a very long time for God to answer.

Slavery in Egypt for some 250 years.

Expulsion from our own and other lands.

Scapegoating for millennia.

The pogroms.

The Holocaust.

Jews are raised in this – many of our holidays tell the story of overcoming – with God's help –

those who tried to kill us.

And we carry on."

And she's right—I understand the importance of the Covenant.

I have read the associated texts many, many times. And yet—this time I noticed something that I hadn't really considered before.

You see, we all rightly focus on the fact that God called Abram (Abraham) and that Abram simply answered the call.

We all rightly focus on the promise, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."

But there's one other thing in there! Something I'd never really wrestled with before.

God says, "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse..."

I freely admit that I am a huge geek and that when you say the word "curse" what comes to mind are stories like "The Monkey's Paw" and Christine, objects like The One Ring from The Lord of the Rings and Craven Edge from The Legend of Vox Machina,

or spells cast by characters like Terry Pratchett's, Granny Weatherwax and Richard Bachman's (aka Stephen King) Taduz Lemke.

From there I become troubled, remembering the real-life implications of Christians

believing in Satanic curses:

200 accusations and 20 executions in Salem, Massachusetts between early 1692 and mid-1693, just to name one example.

In short, when I think of curses I think of Evil, torture and death both in fiction and in reality.

Is this really something that we can attribute to God?

Does God curse people?

When I struggle with scripture, I frequently find that a "plain English" reading has fallen short for me—frequently because that scripture grew out of a very different culture in a completely different language from the one I am reading in.

Which is why I turned to the Rabbi I mentioned before and asked her for a Jewish understanding of blessings and curses.

I love her use of language, so I'm going to quote her directly:

"So, to completely oversimplify blessings and curses to an almost appalling but possibly helpful degree:

Blessings are God's support and presence – which leads to a life of goodness (read: righteousness, pursuing justice, following the 613 commandments in Torah, etc.)

Curses are the absence of God's presence – which leads to ruin. This can be self-inflicted or come from outside either directly by God (maybe a plague?) or an army?

In the text you mention, God is speaking to the Jews – actually the Israelites at that point – (we weren't Jews until we came back from exile in Babylon. That's another long story)

Recall that God chose the people to be a blessed and beloved – even if maddeningly human – so anyone acting against them would feel God's wrath.

That's the basic interpretation of it."

And then she mentions the story of Balak and Balaam:

Numbers 22:41-23:12

On the next day Balak took Balaam and brought him up to Bamoth-baal; and from there he could see part of the people of Israel.

Then Balaam said to Balak, 'Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.'

Balak did as Balaam had said; and Balak and Balaam offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

Then Balaam said to Balak, 'Stay here beside your burnt-offerings while I go aside. Perhaps the Lord will come to meet me. Whatever he shows me I will tell you.'

And he went to a bare height.

Then God met Balaam; and Balaam said to him, 'I have arranged the seven altars, and have offered a bull and a ram on each altar.'

The Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, 'Return to Balak, and this is what you must say.'

So he returned to Balak, who was standing beside his burnt-offerings with all the officials of Moab.

Then Balaam uttered his oracle, saying:

'Balak has brought me from Aram,  
the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:

"Come, curse Jacob for me;

Come, denounce Israel!"

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?

How can I denounce those whom the Lord has not denounced?  
For from the top of the crags I see him,  
from the hills I behold him;  
Here is a people living alone,  
and not reckoning itself among the nations!  
Who can count the dust of Jacob,  
or number the dust-cloud of Israel?  
Let me die the death of the upright,  
and let my end be like his!’  
Then Balak said to Balaam, ‘What have you done to me?  
I brought you to curse my enemies, but now you have done nothing but bless them.’  
He answered, ‘Must I not take care to say what the Lord puts into my mouth?’

Balak wanted Balaam to curse the Israelites, but—as the good Rabbi points out—“It’s worthy to note that Balaam was not an Israelite and God had imbued him with the gift of prophesy and had full control over what came out of his mouth.”

Personally, I am struck by the image of the Israelites camped out with no idea of the danger that lurked above them—

And the fact that they didn’t need to know.

God was protecting them—refused to have them be cursed—without them ever even needing to know about it.

The Rabbi I know says that I should:

“Keep in mind that Jewish theology and much of Jewish philosophy concerning this topic is concerned with the Jewish People as a whole.

The Torah rarely speaks about one-on-one blessings and curses.

It’s about the behavior of a people as a whole – and that is God’s province.

Of course, there are personal consequences for poor behavior.

So, when the Israelites (actually, mostly the learned, the priests and Levites, and scribes, etc.) were exiled to Babylon, they concluded they must have done some collective wrong to deserve such a fate and much introspection was undertaken.

The prophets underscore that guilty sentiment.”

For the record, this is what Christian Nationalists in my beloved homeland is so afraid of—that the United States will be punished if they cannot bring the entire country in line with their theology.

Personally, I disagree with the foundation of their argument—the United States is not and never was intended to be an inherently religious nation.

I therefore do not believe that God holds the United States to the same standards as the Jewish People—after all, the United States is an incredibly diverse group of people of every culture and religious belief imaginable.

To punish a whole country for that would be unjust, and my God is a just God.

I’m struck by the idea of curse as the lack of God’s presence—a breakdown of the relationship between people and the Divine.

If that’s true, then breaking a curse takes the same kind of work that it takes to make up with someone.

If that’s true—then a curse is another way of saying that actions naturally have consequences.

That feels right to me.

And I'm struck by the way the Jewish people's response to the Exile was deep introspection.

They did not point fingers.

They did not blame The Liberals, or The Queer Agenda, or Wokeness.

They asked the question of themselves—What did we do wrong?

What did we do?

And most of all, I'm struck by the way the Jewish people have made meaning out of all the terrible things that have happened to them over the course of history—and are continuing to happen to them today.

You understand that this topic has been a hot one for thousands of years –

not because there is a question that God will fulfill this promise –

but because it sometimes takes a very long time for God to answer.

Slavery in Egypt for some 250 years.

Expulsion from our own and other lands.

Scapegoating for millennia.

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The Holocaust.

Jews are raised in this – many of our holidays tell the story of overcoming – with God's help –

those who tried to kill us.

And we carry on.

What do you say?

Amen?

#### PRAYER PREPARATION:

I don't know about you, but as a non-binary person I am so inspired by the story of the Jewish people.

I'm inspired by the story of this ragtag group of underdogs blessed by God—

the story of how the world attempts to wipe them off the face of the earth and how the world fails to do so over and over again—

the story of blessings and survival.

Which brings me to this song, and how surviving makes you stronger.

<https://youtu.be/UFkJkFB4xKo>, "Warrior" ~ Demi Lovato

This is a story that I have never told

I gotta get this off my chest to let it go

I need to take back the light inside you stole

You're a criminal

And you steal like you're a pro'

All the pain and the truth

I wear like a battle wound

So ashamed, so confused

I was broken and bruised

Now I'm a warrior

Now I've got thicker skin

I'm a warrior

I'm stronger than I've ever been

And my armor, is made of steel, you can't get in

I'm a warrior  
And you can never hurt me again  
Out of the ashes, I'm burning like a fire  
You can save your apologies  
You're nothing but a liar  
I've got shame, I've got scars  
But I will never show  
I'm a survivor  
In more ways than you know  
'Cause all the pain and the truth  
I wear like a battle wound  
So ashamed, so confused  
I'm not broken or bruised  
'Cause now I'm a warrior  
Now I've got thicker skin  
I'm a warrior  
I'm stronger than I've ever been  
And my armor, is made of steel, you can't get in  
I'm a warrior  
And you can never hurt me  
There's a part of me I can't get back  
A little girl grew up too fast  
All it took was once, I'll never be the same  
Now I'm taking back my life today  
Nothing left that you can say  
'Cause you are never gonna take the blame anyway  
Now I'm a warrior  
I've got thicker skin  
I'm a warrior  
I'm stronger than I've ever been  
And my armor, is made of steel, you can't get in  
I'm a warrior  
And you can never hurt me again  
No-oh, ooh, yeah, yeah, yeah  
You can never hurt me again

We have come to our time in worship that I really do believe is the core of what we do here together, and that is where we uplift our joys and concerns with one another in prayer.

And so I would like to invite you to enter this time of prayer with a sense of reverence.

We're about to enter into a conversation with God, and that shouldn't be done lightly,

but rather "... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"  
(Ephesians 4:2-3)

Please type your prayers into chat, or if you need to use voice simply emote raising your hand so everybody can have a voice.

And as we pray together, you may wish to respond to others with words like, "God

hear our prayer," or with any other words the Spirit leads to you use.

#### COMMUNITY PRAYER

If there was a prayer inside of you that you couldn't quite get out, it's ok. Because the Psalmist tells us that God knows what we are going to say before the words can even form on our tongues.

And so we know.

We \_ know \_ that God has heard our prayers. Those spoken out loud, those typed into SL chat, and those spoken only in the silence of our hearts.

And that we pray them in the name of the Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

#### LISTEN!

We have done a lot of talking. Let us take a moment of silence to listen to what God might be saying.

Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening...

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

God of Transformation, as we near the edge of winter into spring in the north, and summer into fall in the south of the world, we know that You make all things new. The world is about to become bright and beautiful, but we cannot see it yet. In our own lives we may be facing struggles and challenges that dim our worldview. Remind us, O Loving One, that even if we cannot envision the bright boldness of life in the world, we can trust in the promises You have made us.

We know that Your love is beyond measure, Your greatness far beyond what we can imagine.

And You will transform this time for us:

If it is of bleakness, You will bring light.

If it is of shadow, You will bring hope.

If it is of mourning, You will bring dancing.

Even if we cannot comprehend joy in this time, we know it will return, for You are a God worthy of praise and glory, and You have made us in Your image, awesome and wonderful.

We pray in Your name, now and always.

Amen. (Rev-o-lution Resources by Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell

<http://rev-o-lution.org>, (c) 2021. Used by permission.)

#### BENEDICTION:

And now it really is just this simple:

God loves you.

So, don't forget to love each other.

Go with God.

Go in Peace.

And Amen!

#### CLOSING:

If \_The Lord of the Rings\_ means nothing else to you, let it mean this: Evil can be overcome with love and friendship and kindness.

Keep your eyes on Samwise (Sean Astin) and notice just exactly when that cursed ring is finally and completely defeated.

<https://youtu.be/xSUcewLIz0s>, ~A Scene from \_Return of the King\_

\*end\*