

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,
wherever you are

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

"Surely The Presence of the Lord is in This Place"

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

First United Church of Christ and Conference Center Second Life 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."

We celebrate God's Love everyday.

and seek to be a place of belonging for those who need it, where all people will be
included, accepted and supported in their journey of faith and their struggles in
life.

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

If you would like to make a donation to support this ministry

there is a donation bowl in the back,

or you can go to our website

firstuccsl.org

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

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

It's good to be back with you today.

It's been a crazy summer, and it's not over yet.

I'm here today, then out for another couple of weeks.

I am grateful that we have a team of folks who work to bring worship to you,
Something every day.

But since my life is such that I cannot be here as regularly as I would like,
I wanted something to tie my times here with you together.

So I'm going to do something a little unusual - at least in a church,

For the next couple of months, until Advent,

I'm going to talk about finding God outside of church
By doing a worship series based on Barbara Brown Taylor's marvelous book,
"Altars in the World."

I will weave her words in with mine and the words of scripture,
and hopefully it will give you some tools to carry with you beyond this time we
spend together.

We begin today with story from the Book of Genesis from which Barbara drew her
title.

It's the story popularly known as "Jacob's Ladder,"
Though perhaps "Jacob's Stone" would be more appropriate.

It is a story of which Barbara said that the first time she read it, she "knew it
was true, whether it ever happened or not."

It may help to remind you briefly about where in the story of Jacob's life these
events.

Jacob was a young man, running away from home because he had stolen the birthright
of his brother, Esau, by trickery.

So he was not a very nice, young man.

And when he had run, or walked, as far away as he could, he stopped for the night.
Let us listen to God speaking through the words of Genesis, chapter 28, verses 10
through 22.

GENESIS 28:10-22 (NRSVUE)

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran.

He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set.

Taking one of the stones of the place,

he put it under his head and lay down in that place.

And he dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching
to heaven,

and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

And the Lord stood beside him and said,

"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac;

the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring,

and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth,

and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the
south,

and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to
this land,

for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,

"Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

And he was afraid and said,

"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is
the gate of heaven."

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his
head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

He called that place Bethel,

but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying,

"If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go and will give me

bread to eat and clothing to wear,
so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God,
and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house,
and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."

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

"Altars"

Let us pray . . .

"Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

Barbara Brown Taylor's book, "Altars in the World"

Is a series of essays about different spiritual practices of seeing or experiencing
God in our ordinary lives.

In the first chapter, she talks about "The Practice of Walking Up to God."

This is important, Barbara says, because so many of us believe, or have been taught,

That the place we encounter God is in a church.

That's nice and tidy, isn't it?

Then we don't have to think about God the rest of the time.

It's also convenient for the powers of the world,

The forces of domination and patriarchy,

Because God confined in the box of the church walls,

Under control, or at least managed,

So the people who come to church to experience God can be managed too.

So it's not surprising so many people believe this.

At the same time, another whole swath of people, their numbers growing every day it
seems,

Have recognized this for the load of whooey it is and have left the church,

Become one of the "spiritual but not religious," if not outright atheists.

I know, I was one of them for 20 or so years.

But once they step outside the box they don't know what to do next.

They long for something More (capital "M"),

Maybe they've had some experience that makes them know in their hearts that there is
something More,

Something beyond what can be weighed, measured, or rationally explained,

Something Divine, something Holy,

Something "spiritual" – though they often don't know what they mean by that,

Or where or how to find it.

So they search: they try different religions, make pilgrimages to Graceland.

Often they say, "I experience God in nature" – or in art – which is a good start,

But often they don't know how to process those experiences,

Don't understand what those experiences mean for them.

Those with means seem willing to travel halfway across the world, longing searching
for this divine treasure.

"The last place most people look is right under their feet,

In the everyday activities, accidents, and encounters of their lives."

No one longs for what they already have,

"and yet the accumulated insight of those wise about the spiritual life" from across

traditions

"suggests that the reason so many of us cannot see the red X that marks the spot is because we are standing on it."

We have everything we need.

We don't have to change who we are.

"The only thing missing is our consent to be where we are,"

Because where is are is where God meets us,

As God met Jacob in his wilderness.

All we have to do is wake up.

"Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

"Having woken up to God, [Jacob] would never be able to go to sleep again

At least not to the divine presence that had promised to be with him whether he could see it or not."

There, right there, in that place where he lay his head, was "Bethel,"

Which means "House of God."

And using the stone he slept on as a foundation, Jacob built an altar.

Barbara Brown Taylor notes that Jacob lived before there was a Temple in Jerusalem,

Before there was a designated place to connect with God,

So "people were free to see the whole world as an altar.

The divine could erupt anywhere,

And when it did they marked the spot in any way they could,

Although there was no sense hanging around for long,

Since God stayed on the move."

It is really interesting to speak with you about all this

In a church without brick-and-mortar walls.

A church where you attend from your home, or wherever you are in the world.

And yet, there are still boundaries here, a designated space .

not of stone or wood or cement, but of time.

The Bible is full of stories of people meeting God in the world,

Outside of the 4 walls of a designated "holy" space.

In the Bible, "people encounter God under shady oak trees, on riverbanks,

On the tops of mountains, and in long stretches of barren wilderness.

God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, burning bushes, and perfect strangers.

When people want to know more about God,

The son of God tells them to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air,

To women kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay."

Indeed, as Barbara writes: "Earth is so full of divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars"

Set where we or others have encountered God,

Often while we were out doing other things.

A couple of weeks ago you may remember there was a supermoon, a "Blue" moon.

I went out to see it once it had risen.

It was big and beautiful and made me smile.

Then I went to bed.

No, I didn't dream of a ladder to heaven.

But in the morning I went next door to get my grandson to watch him while my daughter drove my granddaughter to preschool.

It was early in the morning, the sun not yet above the horizon.

The sky was a kind of pinky lavender.

I looked up and saw the moon again, still hanging in that soft dawn sky.
Not as big of course, but full and round and lovely.
I paused in pushing the stroller to appreciate it.
And then I heard the sound of geese approaching,
Their honking cries breaking through the silence of the morning.
And as I watched, a small group of them flew across the sky, right in front of that full moon.
My breath caught in awe; tears wet my eyes.
As some of you may know, in the Celtic tradition, a wild goose is a symbol for the Holy Spirit.
I had no doubt I had been visited that day, when I really needed it.
I will carry that vision with me always, like an altar in my heart, reminding me that wherever I am
"Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."
Wherever I am in the world is "Bethel," the House of the Lord.
Several years ago, Barbara was asked to speak to a church about what was saving her life now.
What a powerful question.
"What is saving your life now?"
Returning to that question years later, Barbara wrote:
"What is saving my life now is the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experience of human life here on earth."
So, I ask you, "What is saving your life now?"
Where do you experience God in the world, even if only for the briefest of moments?
Whatever answer comes to you, build an altar there,
In that place or in your heart,
Name space "Bethel,"
And know that, like Jacob, God is with you.
Amen.

This is from the moving "American Beauty"
Can you see the beauty in this ordinary scene?
American Beauty plastic bag scene - Thomas Newman music
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHxi-HSgNPc>

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Worship is a time when we,
as a community,
join our hearts together,
to connect to God and to each other.
So this time is the essence of what we do here together.
If you have a prayer 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

WORDS FOR THE JOURNEY Maori Lord's Prayer

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker,
Pain-bearer,
Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:
The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the earth!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.
With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.
For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.
Amen.

-From the New Zealand/Maori Anglican liturgy

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Our worship is over
our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting
Let us build altars in the world
remembering God is with us always
In the name of the Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself,
Go in peace,
come again in Hope.
Amen

"God in a Box" – Wayne Watson
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncrih_TuJEwo

GO IN PEACE!