

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.

During the opening piece, please feel free to make any Announcements for the good of the community.

And 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 service centers around a prophetic text that opens with the deep, aching desire for God to tear open the heavens and come down so hard that the mountains would quake.

In the end, this is a message of hope—but it comes out of a place of pain, of lament.

I think this piece hits a similar juxtaposition of emotion.

<https://youtu.be/NPnXJDYP17k?si=gPmroNSAht7qRiNy>, "Hope" ~From Shadow of the Tomb Raider, composed by Brian D'Oliveira

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Most churches have a time of offering.

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

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

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.

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."

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity for ever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

SERMON "Tear Open the Heavens"

This Sunday marks the beginning of the Christian liturgical season of Advent—a time of preparation and anticipation of Christmas.

But have you ever wondered what in the world Isaiah—a prophet from around the time of the Babylonian Exile—has to do with Advent?

I know I have.

This text doesn't even have to do with the Messianic expectation: the belief that a

mighty warrior, a descendent of King David, would regain the throne and lead Israel into a time of peace and prosperity.

So what is this piece about?

Well, context:

According to scripture, Jerusalem had been utterly defeated, the Temple destroyed, and all of Israel's warriors, political leaders, and other VIPs had been carried off to Babylon.

There they stayed for decades, before being allowed to return home to rebuild.

"By 520 B.C.E., the people who had returned from the Babylonian exile had been in Jerusalem for some eighteen years.

They had come with high expectations of all that YHWH would do for Jerusalem.

Even the words of Second Isaiah had seemed to promise honor, riches, and political power upon Israel's restoration to Jerusalem (Isa. 49:22-23; 54:11-12).

Instead of the prosperity that they had expected, the returnees were living within a greatly reduced state under a governor rather than a king.

They suffered scarcities of food and drink, and they endured a poverty generated by inflation (Hag. 1:5-11).

After nearly two decades of waiting, the crisis of faith demanded an answer. (Gary W. Light)

I see some similarities between that context and that which Jesus was born into—Israel in a difficult, if not impossible, political and financial situation. Similarities, yes, but not really enough for me to understand why this prophet is related to Advent!

Well, context: What does a prophet do?

"The prophets had an ethical mission: to help liberate creation from pain and suffering, inclusive of both victims and perpetrators of injustice (see, e.g., Isa. 42:1-4; 52:13-53:12; Joel 2:21-22).

They also had a theological mission: to make known that Israel's God was a God of justice and compassion (Mic. 7:18-20).

Their mission was also political: they had to advise political, social, and religious leaders of the day (Jer. 38:14-28).

Finally, Israel's prophets were to be forever in dialogue with God, who would reveal what needed to be said and done (Mic. 6:6-8).

As keepers of the covenant, Israel's prophets were heralds of good news, calling people back to right relationship (Isa. 1:16-17). (Carol J. Dempsey)

So... given that impossible political and financial situation, a prophet was _for sure_ going to say and do something about it!

Their ethical, theological, political, and relational missions would require it of them.

So what is Isaiah saying and doing here?

I believe that he is dealing in hope:

"Hope is an act of faith.

While the people were in exile, they must have dreamed of the day of return.

In their dreams, they may have imagined that things would be the same or at least similar to the condition at the initial onset of exilic life.

Now, eighteen years later, those dreams have become distant and disappointing memories.

Rebuilding is hard and overwhelming at best.

Their pain permeates the words of lament as they wonder if the God who has been with them in history does not seem to be concerned about their lives at present.

Why would God not make these rough ways smooth?

Why is rebuilding and restoring what has been lost so elusive?

...The people want the glory of the past and expect the tools and the tactics of the past to obtain it.

At the same time, they are ready for the Holy One to burn it all down and start anew.

Their plea holds hope, disappointment, and despair at the same time as past memory, current condition, and future prediction battle within their collective consciousness.

Will God be the God they have believed and heard about or is God still standing by as calamity falls upon them?" (Rev. Cheryl A. Lindsay)

I don't know about you, but I see and hear folk today who want the glory of the past and expect the tools and tactics of the past to obtain it while at the same time being ready for the Holy One to burn it all down and start anew.

In all honesty, there are times when I'm ready for it, too.

After all, if the last shall be first and the first shall be last, then I figure when the Holy One comes a black furry transgender person will be handed the reins.

And I imagine she'll be fabulous!

That's not what most of the folk I'm talking about mean when they say it, though.

They are frequently quite willing to blame the "communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left thugs that live like vermin" for their lack of glory.

Personally, I find that language scary, but also—I don't see the hope there.

I just see dehumanization.

Now don't get me wrong—there's a place for complaint in our faith. There's a place for lament.

But the teachings of Jesus are very clear about dehumanization and lament does not stay in complaint.

"Lament encourages us to speak with transparency and frankness.

Lament holds nothing back from God and does not yield to polite discourse.

Lament is raw, pain-filled, and laden with emotional response.

Lament receives and distributes anger, grief, disgust, incredulity, and despair.

But, lament does not conclude there.

Lament progresses.

Lament turns to remembering.

Lament moves from complaint to praise to promise to declaration of hope.

Lament does this because lament engages in dialogue with the Holy One rather than abandoning God even when it seems that the Holy One has retreated from them."

I see two different paths here—the one where a group of "others" is blamed for whatever is wrong with the world, and the one where you turn back to communication and relationship with the Divine.

The blaming path leads to dehumanization and violence that separates you from God.

The path of lament ultimately leads us through hope to a strengthened relationship with God.

Lament—a path of hope that strengthens our relationship with God—does begin to sound very much like Advent to me.

But why the prophet?

Well, context:

"Most importantly, the prophet seeks to eradicate the perceived distance between the Sovereign God and the people.

The prophet inhabits that space as the bridge between the divine and the humane.

Advent reminds us that Godself came as the embodiment of that bridge.

In Christ, heaven and earth meet.

Mountains will quake. God's glory will be revealed.

The ministry, purposes, and work of the Holy One will continue, magnify, multiply, and eventually be delegated to human disciples empowered by the God who, at one time, seemed so distant but proved to be near and coming even nearer with quaking mountains and awesome deeds." (Rev. Cheryl A. Lindsay)

Now that sounds like Advent to me.

What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

<https://youtu.be/SkvYR4BcHYc?si=aTKicdG73XdgP2Q1>, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" ~for KING + COUNTRY

O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel
O come, Thou Day spring
Come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel
O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heavenly home
Make safe the way that leads on high
And close the path to misery
(Would you stand with us and sing this chorus? Rejoice)
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel (sing it again)
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel

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 Who Watches, in this season we often speak of watching and waiting for You, but we know deep down, You are waiting for us.

You are watching and waiting for us to sing our songs of justice like Mary.

You are watching and waiting for us to declare that there is a new day like Zechariah.

You are watching and waiting for us to bring good news like Gabriel to those who may think they are insignificant and unworthy.

You are watching and waiting for us to do our part in this incredible drama of Your kin-dom on earth as it is in heaven.

We've delayed too long, O God.

We've put caring for the earth off onto the next generation.

We've put living into peace onto the shoulders of politicians.

We've wiped our hands and believed we don't need to do anything, but You are the one who is watching us, O God.

May we repent and turn back to Your ways.

May we enter this season of Advent reminded that we are the ones who must act.

We are the ones who must change.

We are the ones who can build up Your kin-dom.

Call us out of our slumber.

Call us out of our seats in the audience.

Call us into action, for Your kin-dom to come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

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:

This piece speaks eloquently about the courage and compassion that is centered in Hope.

https://youtu.be/f5FAkShOYlA?si=YHKZ_kNQFa3HE9ch, "Hope Is An Open Window" ~Diana Ross

Are we not more than hunger and music
Are we not more than harlequins and horns
Are we not more than color and drums
Are we not more than anger and dance
Give me courage so I can spread it over my face and mouth
Give me courage, give me courage
Give me courage, give me courage
I walk these city streets see the people there
Look into the eyes of quiet despair
And the faces tell a story that words never can
And it falls to everyone of us to try and understand
Out of kindness
One act of grace makes the world we walk a better place
Hope is an open window
Love an open door
To reach out for each other
Is what we came here for
Through an open window
We can see the way
If we hold on to each other, every day
We build walls of suspicion with bars of fears
Tell ourselves we'll be safe in here
I know more brings us together
Than keeps up apart
First we got to tear down these walls within our hearts
We might be strangers, we can be friends
You and I we both need to let somebody in
Hope is an open window
Love an open door
To reach out for each other
Is what we came here for
Through an open window
We can see the way
If we hold on to each other, every day
Give me courage so I can spread over my face and mouth

We are secret rivers with shaking hips and crests
Come awake in our thunder so that our eyes can see behind trees
Give me courage so I can spread over my face and mouth
Give me courage, give me courage
Give me courage, give me courage
Hope is an open window
Love's an open door
To reach out for each other
Is what we came here for
Through an open window
We can see the way
If we hold on to each other, every day
Hope is an open window
Love an open door
Gotta be there for each other
Is what we sent here for
Through an open window
We can find a way
To love one another
Hope is an open window
Love an open door

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