

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

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" - David Crowder Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9S8nj9ePxY>

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."

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

We will also celebrate Holy Communion together today and all are welcome at the Sacred Table.

So you may wish to gather the elements: some bread, a cracker or cookie, even some cake or pie,

and something to drink such as wine, juice, or water.

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.

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.

"Precious Lord" - Cyndi Reynolds
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugry27njPaw>

INTRODUCTION

In our Morning Meditations, Monday and Friday mornings,
For Advent we are using the Advent devotional
"Bless the Advent We Actually Have" by Kate Bowler.
So I thought I'd use her Sunday meditations as a jumping off point for my Sundays as well,
Both for lighting the Advent Candle and for my message.
The scripture she chose for the First Sunday of Advent is from the end of the 40th chapter of Isaiah,
Let us listen to God speaking through the words of Isaiah 40, chapter 28-31.

ISAIAH 40:28-31

Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
The Lord does not faint or grow weary;
God's understanding is unsearchable.
The Lord gives power to the faint
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted,
but those who wait for the Lord
shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

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

"Hope in Protest"

Let us pray . . .

I've been thinking a lot about hope, lately.
We went from headlines about the war in Ukraine
To the horrific attack on Israel by Hamas
To the horrific retaliatory attack by Israel in Gaza.
Our cherished institutions in this country,
Democracy and the rule of law,
And just plain common decency,
Are under attack everywhere we turn.
And don't even get me started on the climate crisis.
With all that is happening,
Where is hope?
What does it look like?
A friend of mine said something this week that has really stayed with me,
That Advent hope is hope without expectation of a particular outcome.
My first thought was, that can't be right.
In Advent we are waiting for something very specific, you know,
Jesus, the baby in the manger, Christmas and all of that.
Even looked at symbolically, we are waiting for new life to be born in us and in our world.
But on further reflection, I realized she was right.
We are waiting for that, that's what Advent is all about,
Waiting and preparing for that new life to be born.
But - Do we have a preconceived idea of what that will be?
What that new life will look like?
Whether we admit it to ourselves or not, I think very often we do.
And then, when Christmas, when new life, doesn't come just as we expected,
We are disappointed,
When it happens again and again,
We give up in despair.
Why bother to hope - it just leads to heartbreak?
Kate Bowler writes:
"As we sit amidst our shattered dreams of what was not possible or what came undone,
of what we have lost or of what was never healed,
it is difficult to know what hope is supposed to look like...now.
What are we hoping for exactly?
How do we find real hope in the midst of all our disappointment?
How do we stay awake to the kind of possibility Advent asks of us?"
A friend told me a story,
It's been a while since she told it to me, so I'm fuzzy on the details,
but I think I remember the important parts right.
It's the story of a man who worked in disaster relief.
There was a big blizzard around Christmastime,
And many people were stuck in their homes without power for days,
Because the snowplows and electrical crews were overwhelmed.
This man was going door to door on snowshoes, helping to dig people out.
He got to this one's man house on Christmas Day and got inside.
It was cold and the homeowner sat huddled in blankets in a chair, waiting.
The relief worker, whose name was John, told the man in the chair to get ready,
because the rescue workers were behind close and could get him out to someplace

warm.

The man didn't move, "I'm not going," he said.

"Why not?" asked John.

"Because," the man replied, "it's Christmas, and Jesus didn't come again this year."

I don't know what that man expected Jesus, or Christmas to be like,

But I would say Jesus did come - and was sitting right in front of him.

Kate writes:

"hope can feel like a drug that must be carefully administered.

Too much and we're setting ourselves up for disappointment or disillusionment.

Too little and we're freighted with despair."

I think that this may be the difference between hope and optimism,

Though we often use the words interchangeably.

We are optimistic about a specific outcome:

I will win the race, get the job;

That my candidate will prevail in the election,

There will be peace in the Middle East by the end of the year.

Whatever we imagine new life looks like now.

And we are often overly optimistic.

Or perhaps not, perhaps we see the harsh realities of life all too clearly,

So in the face of those impossibilities, we can't be optimistic at all.

So again, we are stuck, because, why bother?

But true hope, real hope is different.

We can have hope that,

Whatever the specific outcome,

God will be there in the struggle, working with us towards love, towards wholeness and healing, towards justice.

We cannot run the race, heal the world,

Or face whatever pain, disappointment, or joy is before us, alone.

But we don't have to, because God is with us.

Emmanuel, remember?

Hope becomes a protest against the forces of injustice, pain, suffering, and yes evil that wants us to be stuck and in despair.

That wants us to give up hope in God,

And rely only on our own human devices.

To think that when we win we win on our own, but when we fail, God fails us,

When the reverse is more often true.

When we try to rely only on ourselves, or our human institutions, we fail;

Our strength gives out, we make poor choices,

That's on us, not on God.

This, I believe, is the message of the passage from Isaiah we heard earlier.

Notice it promises not that those "who wait for the Lord" will prevail,

But that they will have the strength to go on,

And, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said,

"the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

This is also, I think the meaning of one of my favorite quotes, from Julian of Norwich,

"All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

It may not be what I wanted, or expected, but with the help of God it will be "well."

Whenever I hear this text from Isaiah I think of the movie "Chariots of Fire."

Runner Eric Liddell sticks to his principles of not running on the Sabbath,
Even at the Olympics,
And instead spending that time with God.
From that he draws the strength he needs to dig deep and run the best he can,
And see the race to its end.
He admits that he cannot run the race alone; he leans on God.
He had hope that if he honored God, even under pressure to put country first,
That something good would come of it,
Though he didn't know what or how;
It seemed impossible,
So he was not optimistic.
But something, I would say Spirit, nudged another runner to offer to switch events
with him,
so Eric could honor the Sabbath and still run.
It turned out the real race for Eric at the Olympics was not running,
It was a race of faith, and he did not run it alone.
On the Sunday Eric had been scheduled to run, instead he preached at a local church.
His text: Isaiah 40.
Here is the scene:

[scene from Chariots of Fire]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwUVbsDSTF4>

"Where does the strength come from," Eric says elsewhere,
"to see the race to its end.
It comes from within."
This is Advent hope.
"It is," as Kate Bowler writes, "the realization of our limitations
or of our lack of agency or of the inability for us
to save ourselves and the ones we love.
This kind of hope is not a wish list sent to Santa Claus.
Advent hope is gritty.
It shirks all false optimism.
It is hope as protest.
Hope in the face of impossibilities."
So we can wait, this Advent,
In hopeful expectation,
That new life is coming, it is always coming,
Not perhaps as we want or expect,
But it will come.
If we lean on God we will recognize it when it comes to our door,
And embrace it,
And we will be held in return.
You want to do something radical,
Hope.
Amen.

"All Will Be Well" – Meg Barnhouse

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Kadbd3tCqc

SHARING THE SACRED TABLE

This table is an expression of our hope.

This table is open to all

who seek nourishment for the soul.

I invite you to hold the elements, the bread and cup, you have gathered.

Feel their weight in your hand.

They are real and tangible,

As God's love is real and tangible,

And experienced in many ways,

As some of us may have bread, others cookies or crackers, tortillas or cake.

Some may have wine, others juice, or water, or soda.

And yet as we are gathered here to eat together, they all represent God's love for each of us.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God,

Bless this bread and cup,

May they be vibrant with your presence,

Nourishing what is deepest in us.

And as we take these elements into our bodies,

May they nourish our hope in you.

Amen.

And so we remember a time when in a upper room long ago,

Jesus took the bread on the table for the meal,

Blessed it, broke it, and shared it saying,

"This is my body, given for you. Take, eat, and remember me."

In the same way he took a cup of wine, the juice of the vine,

And shared it saying,

"Drink and as often as you drink, remember me."

I invite you now to close your eyes, if you are comfortable doing so,

And imagine yourself at a round table with others as food is passed from hand to hand.

Take the bread,

This is the bread of life,

The body of Christ for you.

Take, eat, and remember.

[pause to eat]

Now drink the cup of blessing and remember.

[pause to drink]

Let us pray.

We give thanks, O God, for the nourishment provided body and soul at this table.

May it inspire us to offer that nourishment in your name to those who need it.

Amen.

LIGHTING ADVENT WREATH

We end today by lighting the first Advent candle, the candle of hope.

May it burn bright for us this Advent.

Let us pray.

God, these are darkening days, with little hope in sight.

Help us in our fear and exhaustion. Anchor us in hope.

Blessed are we with eyes open to see the accumulated suffering of danger,

sickness, and loneliness,
the injustice of racial oppression,
the unimpeded greed and misuse of power, violence, intimidation,
and use of dominance for its own sake, the mockery of truth,
and disdain for weakness or vulnerability –
and worse, the seeming powerlessness of anyone trying to stop it.
Blessed are we who ask:
Where are you, God? And where are Your people –
the smart and sensible ones
who fight for good and have the power to make it stick?
Blessed are we who cry out:
Oh God, why does the bad always seem to win?
When will good prevail?
We know you are good, but we see so little goodness.
God, show me your heart.
How you seek out the broken, lift us on your shoulders,
and carry us home no matter how weak we've become.
God, seek us out, and find us,
we your tired people,
and lead us out to where hope lies
where your kingdom will come and your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Fill us with your courage.
Calm us with your love.
Fortify us with your hope.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Our worship is over
our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting.
Go in peace, come again in hope.
Amen.
Let's dance.
"Hope in Front of Me" – Danny Gilkey
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KIhYZQ_oww