

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

"Spirit Move" Kalley Heligentahal

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbdSQ8MLnYs>

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.

Paster Jerome will be offering a Bible Study on the Gospel of John

beginning next Thursday at 5pm SLT,

upstairs in the Gathering Room.

Next week during worship is the congregational annual meeting.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

The lectionary gospel reading for today,

Called Trinity Sunday in the church calendar,

comes from the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, and is unique to John's gospel.

The story takes place while Jesus is in Jerusalem during the Passover,

and soon after he threw the moneychangers out of the temple.

Jesus has a nighttime visit from a Pharisee named Nicodemus. It is from this story that the well-known phrase "born again," comes, but the Greek word "another" can be translated three different ways: as being born "again," "from above," or "anew." And the problem with translation is that each translator must pick one. The New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, which is my usual source and which we will hear today, uses "from above," but as you listen, remember that the words carry all those meanings as well. Let us listen to God speaking to us through the words of John, chapter 3, verses 1 through 17.

JOHN 3:1-17 (NRSVUE)

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him

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

“Stuck” by Oliver Jeffers (9 min)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdloV_zl3SM

"Getting Unstuck"

Let us pray . . .

Among other things, among many other things,
the story of Nicodemus's nighttime visit to Jesus
is a story about the perils of being stuck.

Because Nicodemus is stuck.

He's in a kind of a rut - you know -

a long, narrow, deep path or channel made by going over the same route over and over.

And that rut, it's worked for him.

He's been comfortable in it.

Feels like it's a good groove.

It's clear, gets him from point A to point B.

In fact, it's so well-worn that it's become hard to see over the edges;
a rut so deep it's become a trench.

But through Jesus, he's caught a glimpse of something more,

something just beyond the edges of that rut,

something on the fringe of his understanding of the world, of God.

So he goes to see Jesus,

metaphorically peaking over the edge to try to get a better look.

But he just can't seem to see it.

Stuck - he is left muttering,

"How can these things be?"

The problem, Jesus tells him, is that the rut you are in is really a birth canal.

You're not supposed to stay there forever,

you're supposed to emerge sometime,

supposed to be born into a new way of being.

What happens if a baby gets stuck in the birth canal?

It dies. Someone wrote that

"the only difference between a rut and the grave is the depth."

That's what's at stake here.

The perils of being stuck are death - spiritual death.

Interpreting this text, commentators have often condemned Nicodemus

for coming to Jesus "by night,"

under the safe cover of darkness.

I don't see it that way at all.

I think the darkness of night is descriptive of where Nicodemus was spiritually.

It's the darkness of the rut,

where the high walls cast shadows, block out the light.

But it's also the darkness of the womb, where new life begins.

Which is great, if you don't stay there too long.

Jesus essentially tells Nicodemus that he's been gestating.

And he's grown there,

in the womb that was the religious tradition and teaching into which he first was born.

Grown enough that he can almost peek.

Grown enough that, unlike many of his fellow Pharisees,
he recognized that God was doing something through this wandering rabbi from
Nazareth.

But now, Jesus says, if you want to grow more, understand more,
If you want to get closer to God, you'll have to climb out of the rut,
that is also a birth canal,
And be born again.

Because the view you have, from down in that rut,
that understanding of God,
it's not bad, but it's small - way too small.

And if you stay there too long, it will choke the life out of you.
It will become like poison.

That's the point of the whole bit about Moses lifting up the serpent in the
wilderness.

It's a reference to a story in the Hebrew Bible where the people are complaining,
they couldn't see past their own narrow point of view,
their own petty concerns.

So God sends poisonous snakes to bite them.

But God tells Moses to make a figure of a snake and put it on a staff.

If people keep their eyes on the staff they will live,
if they don't, the snake poison will kill them.

It's like the old story of the man who slipped and fell,
ending up holding onto the side of a cliff by his fingernails.

He can't see over the edge, and he can't climb up himself.

So he calls out,

"Is there anybody there? Help!"

And he hears a voice, "Don't be afraid. I am here. I can help you."

"Great," says the man, "what do I do?"

"Just let go," says the voice,

"I will catch you and you will be safe."

"What," says the man, "I can't let go, I'll fall.

Who is this speaking anyway?"

"I am God," comes the reply, "just let go and you will be saved."

After a moment, the man calls out again, "is there anybody else up there?"

Stuck. He's stuck.

He can't get himself unstuck any more than we can give birth to ourselves.

We need help from something beyond ourselves;

it's a Spirit thing, says Jesus.

You can be "born of the Spirit," born "from above."

But here's the thing about the Spirit, it's out of our control.

It's like the wind;

it blows where it wants to blow and you don't know where it comes from or where it's
going.

Oh, down there in your rut you can hear it - like I heard the wind howling as it
whipped around my house this past week,

but unless you climb out of the rut you'll never feel it.

So while we can't give birth to ourselves,

we can participate in the process,

by letting go so the Spirit can blow us, and blow through us,

to where we need to go.

Have you noticed that the traditional images of God as the Holy Spirit are all about movement?

Rushing wind, flowing water, flickering fire,
A bird that flies through the air?

The Spirit isn't static, stuck in one form,
It flows and moves and changes.

And if we open ourselves up to move with it,
We will change too,

Being reborn, again and again and again.,
The thing about birth,

whether a physical birth or a spiritual birth,
is that it can be difficult and painful.

It's hard to leave somewhere that feels so comfortable and safe for the unknown.
It can also be messy and risky.

The winds of the Spirit may blow us where we do not want to go.

But, suggests Jesus, the risks of staying in place, down in the rut,
of holding onto the side of the cliff,
are even greater.

It's a challenging message,
as hard sometimes for us to hear as it was for Nicodemus.

Not just because this process of being born again
and again and again

can be difficult and messy and scary,
but because it's so hard to know which paths we are on,
which habits, which traditions

are grooves we should be on and which have become ruts.

So hard to know which we should stay with because they are life-giving;
and which we need to let go.

There are no easy answers to that;

Jesus didn't give Nicodemus any easy answers either.

Maybe because the struggle itself, the questioning, is important.

That process is the spiritual practice of discernment.

It takes reflection and prayer.

Think of what could have happened if Floyd, in the story Stuck,
had stopped even once and asked whether throwing more things at a tree was a good
idea.

If he had just paused for a moment and reflected.

Maybe he would have climbed up the ladder,
Instead of throwing it.

And then, Floyd's throwing more and more things into the tree to get stuck,
Finally worked,

He got his kite back.

Well, it worked for him,

But not for all the others affected along the way.

We might think our own spirituality is all about us,
But it's not.

We are connected to the world;

Our stuck-ness affects the world,

But so can our healing.

Maybe that's why Jesus says to Nicodemus,

“Are you a teacher of Israel, and still you don’t know these things?”

Teachers can only teach what they know.

If Nicodemus is stuck,

His students will be too.

He owes it to his students to keep growing,

So he can show them the way.

“Transform yourself,” activist Grace Lee Boggs wrote,

“to transform the world.”

This passage concludes with the reminder that we are not alone in this process.

We are born again – and again – and again – in the Spirit.

God is there.

And God loves the world – all the world – and all of us in it.

God is there helping us to see the new paths open to us,

helping us to climb the walls of the ruts we find ourselves in,

reaching down a hand to pull us over the edge of the cliff and into the windy world above us,

holding us safe if we start to fall.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,”

to show us new paths, and challenge us to take them.

So that we might be saved;

so that we might get unstuck.

Might have abundant life in the Spirit.

The winds are blowing,

Let us be away.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

“Courage to Change” Sia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0U9iGANYM08>

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.
And we pray all this in the name of the one
who taught us to pray together, saying:
"Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kin-dom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Given us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for Thine is the kin-dom, and the power,
and the glory forever.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Our worship is over,
our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting
for us to dream, with our eyes wide open.
Go in peace,
come again in hope.
Amen.

"The Growing Seed" - Dustin Saylor
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edfgGpgkCj8>

GO IN PEACE!