

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.

If you get a message stating that the video is unavailable, please toggle media in your viewer; that usually fixes the problem.

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 with me, or in the aisles, or in the back of the sanctuary, so if the mood strikes you at any point in the service—I say go for it!

GATHERING:

In today's lesson, how a person wears a sword becomes an important detail.

The swords in this scene from the 2004 film, Troy, are of a similar size and shape to the one described in the scripture.

Watch for the moment the second spear is broken for first Hector and then Achilles to draw their swords.

Please notice that both actors are fighting right-handed and that each wears their sword on their left hip.

<https://youtu.be/j-Ze3KEhKnM?si=ZIn13MSETq8ddS-B>, "Hector vs Achilles" ~a scene from Troy (2004)

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 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

Judges 3:7-31

The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God, and worshipping the Baals and the Asherahs.

Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim; and the Israelites served Cushan-rishathaim for eight years.

But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the Israelites, who delivered them, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother. The spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

So the land had rest for forty years. Then Othniel son of Kenaz died.

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

In alliance with the Ammonites and the Amalekites, he went and defeated Israel; and they took possession of the city of palms. So the Israelites served King Eglon of Moab for eighteen years.

But when the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man.

The Israelites sent tribute by him to King Eglon of Moab.

Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges, a cubit in length; and he fastened it on his right thigh under his clothes.

Then he presented the tribute to King Eglon of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man. When Ehud had finished presenting the tribute, he sent the people who carried the tribute on their way.

But he himself turned back at the sculptured stones near Gilgal, and said, 'I have a secret message for you, O king.'

So the king said, 'Silence!' and all his attendants went out from his presence.

Ehud came to him, while he was sitting alone in his cool roof-chamber, and said, 'I have a message from God for you.' So he rose from his seat.

Then Ehud reached with his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon's belly; the hilt also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the dirt came out.

Then Ehud went out into the vestibule, and closed the doors of the roof-chamber on

him, and locked them.

After he had gone, the servants came.

When they saw that the doors of the roof-chamber were locked, they thought, 'He must be relieving himself in the cool chamber.' So they waited until they were embarrassed.

When he still did not open the doors of the roof-chamber, they took the key and opened them. There was their lord lying dead on the floor.

Ehud escaped while they delayed, and passed beyond the sculptured stones, and escaped to Seirah.

When he arrived, he sounded the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites went down with him from the hill country, having him at their head. He said to them, 'Follow after me; for the Lord has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.'

So they went down after him, and seized the fords of the Jordan against the Moabites, and allowed no one to cross over.

At that time they killed about ten thousand of the Moabites, all strong, able-bodied men; no one escaped.

So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land had rest for eighty years.

After him came Shamgar son of Anath, who killed six hundred of the Philistines with an ox-goad. He too delivered Israel.

SERMON "Left-Handed Compliments"

I have preached sermon series here over the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—who was renamed Israel.

I've preached sermons over Jacob's family, the 12 sons who became the 12 Tribes, paying special attention to Joseph—he of the Amazing Coat.

One of you was brave enough to ask me if that was the same Joseph from the Christmas story, and so we continued that series into Exodus and learned about how Egypt forgot Joseph—and how Moses and the Israelites carried Joseph's bones into the Wilderness to seek the Promised Land.

We spent time learning about Joshua and how he led the Israelites to conquer the people who were already living in the Land which was promised to them—a Land said to be flowing with milk and honey.

Interesting side note: milk and honey are the two most non-violent sources of nourishment humans can partake in—not even a plant directly harmed and consumed.

In all honesty, I'm confused as to how the unrelenting violence of the story squares with the Land of Milk and Honey.

In any case, for some reason—probably the beginning of Advent!—we left off the story there.

And then, later, we explored the story of King David—because to understand Jesus as Messiah, we must understand who David was and who people hoped and prayed the Messiah would be.

We picked up that story with the inception of the very first Jewish monarchy.

So—what I'm trying to say is that we skipped ahead. How did we get from conquering the Promised Land to the people looking around at the surrounding nations and saying, "Hey, they've all got kings. We need a king!"

What we skipped is the book of Judges. If Joshua tells the story of conquest, Judges tells the story of occupation.

In this context the word "judge" refers to a leader, like a magistrate—while part of their job would be to pass judgement on criminal acts, their power was more

far-reaching than just that.

The Book of Judges reminds me of Arthurian legend—while bound by time, place, and theme, we are looking at a collection of heroic stories.

As we heard today, some of these heroes barely get a mention—a paragraph or two—while others were more... memorable.

Like Ehud son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a left-handed man.

I love Biblical naming conventions! We're talking about Ehud. Which Ehud? Gera's son. You know the one! He's from the Tribe of Benjamin.

Oh, come on, you know... the left-handed one?

Now—the idea of being left-handed is historically and thematically fraught. The English word, “sinister,” comes from the Latin word for “left.”

Speaking of the Romans, they believed that stepping over the threshold with your left foot invited evil into your home.

Superstition says that when you spill salt, which is precious, Satan appears on your left side and looks over your shoulder to take glee in your wastefulness.

Best to take a pinch of the salt and throw it over your shoulder and directly into his eyes to drive him away!

I could keep going with example of left being synonymous with bad luck or evil in general, but the truth is that we don't exactly know where this notion came from originally.

We guess that it has to do with that fact that most people happen to be right-handed and therefore clumsy with their left hand.

Yup!—simple clumsiness might be the origin of thousands of years of tradition around bad luck and evil in general!

But probably more important to this story is the idea of the right-hand side of God being associated with righteousness, and the left-hand side being the side of judgement.

We see this really clearly in Matthew 25:31-46, which is the part describing the Son of Man “separating the sheep from the goats;” placing the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

My argument, therefore, is that Ehud isn't meant to be an evil or unlucky character.

I'm going to assume that he's more like the Left Hand of God—
God's Judgement.

The story is pretty simple: the people broke their covenant with God—again—and God therefore allowed the Moab people kick their butts for a while.

And when the spanking was over, God sent them a leader—Ehud—to rescue them from the Moabites.

Ehud does this by assassinating the Moab king. And how does he get close enough to the king with a weapon to kill him?

It's clever, really.

First, he has a sword made. The story tells us that it was sharp on both sides of the blade, and that it was a cubit long.

Now, as I understand it, a cubit is the length from the tip of his middle finger to his elbow. Which makes sense, because he was able to fasten it to his thigh and hide it under his clothes—

any longer than that and he wouldn't have been able to walk right!

This is where being left-handed becomes important. A right-handed person wears their sword on their left side because (a) they need room to get the sword clear of the scabbard and

(b) your elbow only comfortably bends the one way.

A left-handed person, therefore, would wear their sword on the right side—and our story tells us that Ehud straps his sword to his right thigh. This is an advantage, because the king and the people meant to keep him safe assumed that an assassin would be left-handed and would be trained to look for tell-tale signs of weaponry on the left side! And it works. Ehud gets the king alone and standing up, pulls out his sword, and brutally kills him. The description is one that haunts me, to be honest. It's like something from a horror story. In any case, Ehud—the left-handed one—assassinates the king, escapes into the countryside, and then leads the Israelites to defeat the leaderless Moabites. It's no more awful than many of the stories of the Knights of the Round table, who were constantly doing most honorable violence to people we're meant to believe deserved it. Me, personally, I'd rather get to the milk and honey part! There is a positive take-away from the story of Ehud for those of us who aren't going to war tonight. Consider how differently this story would have gone if Ehud had been forced to use his right hand as a child? If he'd been taught that there was only one proper way to use a sword—the right-handed way. Ehud wins the day because he takes advantage of the way God made him—left-handed. So there's an argument that this is a story of authenticity as much as it is of assassination and war. Now that I can get behind: Be yourself. You're wonderful, in all of your differences. In fact—the things that make you different are important. Necessary. So—be yourself! What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

I honestly believe that all those little things that make you different from everyone else—even the ones you consider imperfections—are exactly what is needed for you do the work God wants for you.

As the songwriter says, "Why waste a second not loving who you are?
Those little imperfections make you beautiful, (beautiful) loveable, valuable
They show your personality inside your heart
Reflecting who you are"

https://youtu.be/PRbGFnnnScw?si=RIvEF4FbNRU_bT-4, "Freckles" ~Natasha Bedingfield

I used to care so much about what others think about

Almost didn't have a thought of my own

The slightest remark would make me embark on a journey of self doubt

But that was a while ago

This girl has got stronger

And if I knew then what I know now

I would have told myself don't worry any longer

It's OK

'Cause a face without freckles is like a sky without the stars

Why waste a second not loving who you are?

Those little imperfections make you beautiful, loveable, valueable

They show your personality inside your heart

Reflecting who you are

(Who you are, who you are, who you are
Oh, yeah yeah, ah)
I wondered if I could trade my body with some body else in magazines
Will the whole world fall at my feet?
I felt unworthy and would blame my failures on the ugliness I could see
When the mirror looked at me
(Sometimes I feel)
Sometimes I still feel like a little girl who doesn't belong in the wrong world
But I'll get it better by reminding myself
That a face without freckles is like a sky without the stars
Why waste a second not loving who you are?
Those little imperfections make you beautiful, (beautiful) loveable, valueable
They show your personality inside your heart
Reflecting who you are
(Who you are)
Reflecting who you are
Reflecting who you are
Ummm, ooh ooh ooh, oh
'Cause a face without freckles is like a sky without the stars
Why waste a second not loving who you are?
Those little imperfections make you beautiful, loveable, valueable
They show your personality inside your heart
Reflecting who you are
Reflecting who you are
Reflecting who you are

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:

Ruler of all nations, remind us that the lines on a map are of our own making and not Yours.

Remind us that the borders You made are ocean shores and riverbeds, living and moving, reminders of the boundaries of fragile ecosystems.

You are the Maker of the earth, and have called us to be caretakers of the whole planet, not just our own country, county, neighborhood or dwelling.

You have made us to care for one another and all of creation.

Call us to remember that we have only one planet, and that we are one people in You.

Bind us together, O God, to be Your body, and to care for the planet You so lovingly made for us.

In the name of Jesus, who laid down his life for us; may we lay down our lives for one another, and care for this earth together.

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:

As I was looking for music that fits the theme for today I picked two pieces based on the lyrics without paying too much attention to who the artist was.

Apparently I need more of this one in my life!

So as I send you out into the world, let her remind you that "...no one else

Can speak the words on your lips

Drench yourself in words unspoken

Live your life with arms wide open

Today is where your book begins"

https://youtu.be/b7k0a5hYnSI?si=QV5WRk9EHm9p_8AS, "Unwritten" ~Natasha Bedingfield

I am unwritten

Can't read my mind

I'm undefined

I'm just beginning

The pen's in my hand

Ending unplanned

Staring at the blank page before you

Open up the dirty window

Let the sun illuminate the words that you could not find
Reaching for something in the distance
So close you can almost taste it
Release your inhibitions
Feel the rain on your skin
No one else can feel it for you
Only you can let it in
No one else, no one else
Can speak the words on your lips
Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins
The rest is still unwritten
Oh, oh, oh
I break tradition
Sometimes my tries are outside the lines
We've been conditioned to not make mistakes
But I can't live that way
Staring at the blank page before you
Open up the dirty window
Let the sun illuminate the words that you could not find
Reaching for something in the distance
So close you can almost taste it
Release your inhibitions
Feel the rain on your skin
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Only you can let it in
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Can speak the words on your lips
Drench yourself in words unspoken
Live your life with arms wide open
Today is where your book begins
The rest is still unwritten
The rest is still unwritten
The rest is still unwritten
Oh, yeah, yeah

end