

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, in the aisles, or in the back of the sanctuary, so if the mood strikes you—I say go for it!

GATHERING:

We are continuing our sermon series of Judges this week. Today we'll be starting the story of Gideon, who starts off emotionally in a place similar to this song.

<https://youtu.be/97S66xee0U8?si=Q5dW-xkotdkcr8l4>, "Give Me A Sign" ~Breaking Benjamin

Dead star shine

Light up the sky

I'm all out of breath

My walls are closing in

Days go by

Give me a sign

Come back to the end

The shepherd of the damned

I can feel you falling away

No longer the lost

No longer the same

And I can see you starting to break

I'll keep you alive

If you show me the way

Forever and ever

The scars will remain

I'm falling apart

Leave me here forever in the dark

Daylight dies

Blackout the sky

Does anyone care?

Is anybody there?

Take this life

Empty inside

I'm already dead

I'll rise to fall again

I can feel you falling away

No longer the lost

No longer the same

And I can see you starting to break

I'll keep you alive

If you show me the way

Forever and ever
The scars will remain
I'm falling apart
Leave me here forever in the dark
God help me I've come undone
Out of the light of the sun
God help me I've come undone
Out of the light of the sun
I can feel you falling away
No longer the lost
No longer the same
And I can see you starting to break
I'll keep you alive
If you show me the way
Forever and ever
The scars will remain
Give me a sign
There's something buried in the words
Give me a sign
Your tears are adding to the flood
Just give me a sign
There's something buried in the words
Give me a sign
Your tears are adding to the flood
Just give me a sign
There's something buried in the words
Give me a sign
Your tears are adding to the flood
Forever and ever
The scars will remain

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 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 6:1-24

The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian for seven years.

The hand of Midian prevailed over Israel; and because of Midian the Israelites provided for themselves hiding-places in the mountains, caves and strongholds.

For whenever the Israelites put in seed, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up against them.

They would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the land, as far as the neighborhood of Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, and no sheep or ox or donkey.

For they and their livestock would come up, and they would even bring their tents, as thick as locusts; neither they nor their camels could be counted; so they wasted the land as they came in.

Thus Israel was greatly impoverished because of Midian; and the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help.

When the Israelites cried to the Lord on account of the Midianites, the Lord sent a prophet to the Israelites; and he said to them,

‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt, and brought you out of the house of slavery;

and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians, and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you, and gave you their land;

and I said to you, “I am the Lord your God; you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.” But you have not given heed to my voice.’

Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites.

The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, ‘The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.’

Gideon answered him, ‘But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?’

And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, "Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?" But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian.' Then the Lord turned to him and said, 'Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.' He responded, 'But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.' The Lord said to him, 'But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them.' Then he said to him, 'If now I have found favor with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. Do not depart from here until I come to you, and bring out my present, and set it before you.' And he said, 'I will stay until you return.' So Gideon went into his house and prepared a kid, and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour; the meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the oak and presented them. The angel of God said to him, 'Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour out the broth.' And he did so. Then the angel of the Lord reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes; and the angel of the Lord vanished from his sight. Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the Lord; and Gideon said, 'Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face.' But the Lord said to him, 'Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die.' Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord, and called it, The Lord is peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites.

SERMON "Gideon and Signs"

Many sermons have been written about what we term "calling" stories; that moment where our hero is contacted by God and given a task.

The most famous one is the Call of Moses—

the Voice from the bush that was on fire but not burning up—

and we can't help but notice that other Calls have things in common with his.

Pretty universally, when the hero is Called by God, his reaction is "Who, me? No, not me. I couldn't possibly..."

I say "his" in this context, not because God does not Call women, but because their questions tend to be different. Mary, the mother of Jesus, for example. She asks, "How can this be?" but does not say "Not me, I'm not good enough."

But Gideon is a dude, and he has the typical guy reaction to being Called by God to do a Big Thing, "I can't be a hero. My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

Here's another similarity in all of those calls: God never takes "I'm not good enough" as an answer.

What makes the Call of Gideon a little bit different, however, is his final push-back: Prove that you're You. Give me a sign.

Is Gideon afraid that he's hallucinating? Is he afraid that he's being tricked by some Evil force? I don't know.

But I do know that my breath kind of catches a little bit when Gideon says to God, “do not.”

“The Lord said to him, ‘But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them.’

Then he said to him, ‘If now I have found favor with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me.

Do not depart from here until I come to you, and bring out my present, and set it before you.’”

Can you imagine having the fortitude to say to God, “Do not leave. I’ll be right back”?

Maybe that’s why at the end of his Call story, Gideon freaks out a little bit, “‘Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face.’”

...and I have been demanding and suspicious with them!

Actually... now that I think about it, there seems to be a wide range of responses to the idea of signs in the Bible.

We have many recountings of wonders and signs that God has done for us. In fact, God recounts in today’s passage,

“I led you up from Egypt, and brought you out of the house of slavery; and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians, and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you, and gave you their land...”

In Acts, Peter argues that Jesus did many wonders and signs that point to him being the Messiah.

On the other hand, poor Thomas gets a bad rap, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

And then there’s the passage from Matthew where Jesus takes religious leaders to task for asking him for a sign:

“The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

He answered them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.”

And in the morning, “It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.” You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.’

Then he left them and went away.” (Matthew 16:1-4)

What is the Sign of Jonah? The whale, surely, but more than that—Jonah was given a message of salvation to be given to people he hated.

He did everything he could to avoid giving them the message, and failed. These people that he hated were, in fact, saved. And he hated it.

I actually give the VeggieTales version of _Jonah_ a lot of credit for the line in their closing song, “Jonah was Prophet, but he never really got it.”

And! To be fair, this incident with the Pharisees and Sadducees came on the heels of the feeding of the thousands—a wonder and a sign to be sure!

So—are signs, or the desire for signs, good? Are they bad?

As with most things, I’ve come to believe that it’s unhelpful to think in an either / or dichotomy. It would be so much easier if life were that simple. But it’s not. I have come to believe that in most things, we should reach for the idea of a spectrum.

In the case of signs and our love of them, I see Disbelief on one side and

Gullibility on the other with Caution somewhere in the middle.

The Pharisees and Sadducees demand a sign and get verbally smacked down because of their hatred and disbelief.

Thomas is chastised because he strays across the fine line between caution and doubt.

Gideon is simply given the sign he asks for because he hits that balance right in the middle; he neither disbelieves nor is gullible, and that's quite alright.

My mind keeps going back to that moment where Gideon realized how he may have come across to the Angel and begs for mercy.

I empathize with him in that moment—I think we all know what it's like to put our foot in our mouth and then proceed to chew.

And in this case, we're talking about God. And ours is not a tame God.

Ours is a face-melting God.

But there's some truth, I think, in how They are depicted in the 1977 film *Oh, God!*—by none other than George Burns.

He managed to pull off a delicate balance of serious and whimsical and mysterious that poked holes in self-importance and pointed to what really matters.

And that—come to think of it—is what a sign is supposed to do, isn't it?

The sign is nothing in and of itself. But it points us to what *is* important.

Understanding that—we are surrounded by signs all the time. The question is—are we looking to what's really important?

I pray that we don't get so caught up in signs that miss what's really important.

What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

I know next to nothing about this next artist.

But I love his metaphor for looking for signs from God as being like inching down the road in a blizzard picking out the reflectors on the side of the road as your only guide to staying on it.

I suspect that his experience of God is different than mine—and that's ok.

<https://youtu.be/8sUDmI7ApdE?si=tDASPVZ1miiTHS3f>, "SIGNS" ~ Demun Jones

[Intro:]

Demun

Struggle

Hahahaha

[Demun Jones:]

Eat, sleep, rock shows, reachin' for the top, so close

I can see it with my eyes closed

Travelin' the long road, rollin' only God knows

When I get there, I hope He tells me

Just keep on showin' me those street signs

As long as I can see them I'ma be fine

[Struggle Jennings:]

Uh, days gettin' blurry, many nights forgotten

Devil on my heels, police keep knockin'

They tellin' me to keep on rockin' just follow signs

But they filled with bullet holes and covered in vines

Roads less traveled is the ones that lead to heaven

Countin' all my blessings, six shells, 357

Uh, no rest and I'm investin' all my time into the grind

Sometimes I lose my way and close my eyes to find
Some kind of peace in these streets, signs read deceased
Can't feast on the past, gotta eat what's in my path
I'm not blind with these blinders on, just see what's ahead of me
No fear of my enemies, I'm only scared of me

[Demun Jones:]

I drove through the hardest rain, tornado alley
With the trees swayin' eighty miles an hour winds God sayin'
"Boy you better be glad you been prayin'
And I've been payin' attention to every you sayin'
And then your friends and family they been foldin' hands
I even got a lot of prayers from devoted fans
So I covered you with grace and spent you again
Like when you was in the blizzard back in 2010
Ice and fog on the mountain and you was drivin' blind
The next reflector on the road was all that you could find
But even then you kept it rollin' one inch at a time
And that there's the kind of faith that can heal the blind
So boy you better pay attention when I give you signs
Now pick up the pace and show 'em all you got the spine
It's blasphemous not to use the tools that I designed"
Just keep on showin' me those street signs
As long as I can see them I'm gonna be fine

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:

Creative Spirit, help us to think outside of the box the world has put us in.

Erase the lines that we have drawn.

Draw the circle wider.

Color outside the lines.

Pull back the veil that has us divided.

Remove the wall that creates binary thinking.

Open our hearts, our minds, our souls, to the inescapable love You have for us, and may we be full of that love for one another.

Help us always to be open to more and to shut out less, for hate and fear keep us small, but love is always expanding us.

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:

I'd never heard of this band, either, but once I ran across this song, I knew that we needed to end with its sweet observation of good things to come.

It's a sign. A sure sign.

<https://youtu.be/M9qRxmxkxNk?si=wiJXZR2hLwDXi0p4>, "It's A Sign" ~Teenage Fanclub

A tender wait for the next leap forward

All hopes and prayers will combine and adorn her

Every day is a stained glass ceiling

With life in her veins and the joy of being

It's a sign, it's a sign

A sure sign

It's a sign, it's a sign

I see you seizing the moment, baby

How sweet the days when our hearts are singing

Sweet are the ways of her new beginning

And each night are there dreams revealing

Does she see in the dark when her eyes are sleeping?

It's a sign, it's a sign

A sure sign

It's a sign, it's a sign (oh)

How she leads me to find my soul (it's a sure sign, a sure sign, it's a sign, it's a sign)

How she leads me to find my soul (it's a sure sign, a sure sign, it's a sign, it's a

sign)

How she leads me to find my soul (it's a sure sign, a sure sign, it's a sign, it's a sign)

It's a sure sign, a sure sign, it's a sign, it's a sign

It's a sure sign, a sure sign, it's a sign, it's a sign

It's a sure sign, a sure sign, it's a sign, it's a sign

It's a sure sign, a sure sign, it's a sign, it's a sign

end