

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:

Today we continue the story of Gideon and find him trying to do loud things in a stealthy way—which made me think of this piece which has been used in a staggering array of films!

https://youtu.be/RVNMZA6lbT8?si=knxS7626Q_VzpKbt, “Battle Without Honor Or Humanity” ~HOTEI

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 6:14-35

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.

That night the Lord said to him, 'Take your father's bull, the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that belongs to your father, and cut down the sacred pole that is beside it;

and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of the stronghold here, in proper order;

then take the second bull, and offer it as a burnt-offering with the wood of the sacred pole that you shall cut down.'

So Gideon took ten of his servants, and did as the Lord had told him; but because he was too afraid of his family and the townspeople to do it by day, he did it by night.

When the townspeople rose early in the morning, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the sacred pole beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built.

So they said to one another, 'Who has done this?'

After searching and inquiring, they were told, 'Gideon son of Joash did it.' Then the townspeople said to Joash, 'Bring out your son, so that he may die, for he has pulled down the altar of Baal and cut down the sacred pole beside it.' But Joash said to all who were arrayed against him, 'Will you contend for Baal? Or will you defend his cause? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning.

If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been pulled down.'

Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, 'Let Baal contend against him', because he pulled down his altar.

Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east came together, and crossing the Jordan they encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.

But the spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him.

He sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him.

He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them.

SERMON "Gideon's Father"

Today's passage includes some of last week's, and some of where we will likely pick up next week, because that's the way the story of Gideon runs—it is rapidly paced, like an action film.

Last week we learned about Gideon's call by God to action—and by God, Gideon leaps into action!

That same night, God directs Gideon to pull down the altar of a local, rival deity named Baal. And to cut down a "sacred pole" that stands next to it.

There is some debate among scholars as to what exactly a "sacred pole" entailed and who or what it represented—

but as a lover of story, the version I like best is that this "pole" was a living tree that represented the goddess Asherah, who might have been a "consort" of Baal. So—God is telling Gideon to replace Baal's altar with one dedicated to Them and use the wood from Asherah's tree to make the first sacrifice on the new altar.

My God is a thorough God!

There is real danger here for Gideon, though. His family, friends, and neighbors have all been worshipping Baal and, presumably, Asherah.

The text specifically tells us that this holy site belongs to Gideon's own father, Joash!

So tearing it down and building a new one for God is more than just a powerful prophetic symbol—it's an invitation to be a victim of violent mob retribution.

So Gideon does what any reasonable man would do—he does the work under the cover of darkness.

Then again—have you ever lived in a small town? It's like living in a fishbowl—everybody is looking in on what you're doing. There is no such thing as a secret, and the Rumor Mill has a life of its own.

It does not take long before everyone to know exactly what has happened to their sacred site and who is responsible.

So the Mob of Retribution sets off to find Gideon—but they find his father, first.

Now, it's worth remembering at this point that the altar and the sacred pole belonged to Joash.

I don't know about you, but if I destroyed something sacred to my father, I'd be in Big Trouble—capital “B” capital “T.” Even as a full grown adult, I have trouble even imagining doing such a thing.

It is also worth remembering that the text says that Gideon wasn't only afraid of the townspeople's reaction to his actions—he worked at night because he was also afraid of his family.

So when the crowd says, “Bring out your son, so that he may die, for he has pulled down the altar of Baal and cut down the sacred pole beside it,” it feels like a very pregnant moment to me.

I imagine Joash letting the moment breathe as he regards the mob.

Finally, he speaks,

“Will you contend for Baal? Or will you defend his cause? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning.

If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been pulled down.”

In other words, yes, my son did those things. And Baal did nothing about it. What are you going to do?

Nothing, apparently. Except to give Gideon an awesome epithet, Jerubbaal. “Let Baal contend against him.”

Because we won't!

There's something to be said for Joash, I think. He deescalated the situation and bolstered his son's reputation in one short argument. I believe that God was with him in that moment just as much as They were with Gideon the night before.

It's a good story. But there are elements of it that I find a little distressful at first blush.

Over the years I have had friends and close acquaintances from just about every religion and spiritual path imaginable, including Neo-Pagans of various stripes.

I can't imagine blowing out their candles without permission, let alone disassembling their altars—

just as I can't imagine them walking into a brick and mortar church and throwing the altar cross on the floor or dancing on the Communion table.

As a Hospital Chaplain I work with all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds and current spiritual paths.

My experience has been that every one of them has to do with how they are connected to other people and something greater than themselves.

What I'm trying to say is that mine is not the only religion, mine is not the only spiritual path, which is worthy.

I do not approve of belittling someone else's spiritual path.

I do not approve of denigrating someone else's Higher Power.

I certainly do not approve of desecrating someone else's sacred sites or holy symbols.

So what, exactly, is God doing? What is this story trying to tell us?

The issue at hand is not that other people are pursuing their own spiritual path.

The issue at hand is not that Baal or Asherah are inherently evil.

The issue at hand is that God's people are pursuing other people's spiritual paths. The issue is that God's people made a Covenant with God and the very first line of that contract clearly states, “You shall have no other gods before Me.”

The issue is the particular agreement between the Jewish people living in the Promised Land in the time of the Judges and their own God.
It's all very personal.

So, what is the lesson here?

Well, there is an overarching theme that I want to draw out at the end of the series—maybe you'll have seen it for yourselves by the time we get there.

But for today, I want to lift up the relationships that Gideon participates in. His relationship with God is one of trust—but not blind trust. We saw last week that Gideon is cautious, but knows who his God is and believes in Them.

Not just that They exist, but that They are with him and will not let him come to harm while doing what God asks of him.

Gideon's relationship with his father is more difficult to parse out—but I would argue that Joash loves his son.

I cannot shake the image of Joash standing before the mob of townsfolk insisting, "bring out your son!"

I recognize that it's just my personal head-canon, but I see a grizzled farmer—played by Clint Eastwood or maybe J.K. Simmons in the film adaptation—

I see that grizzled farmer standing up straight in the doorway and deciding "No. I will not bring him out."

Family is a beautiful thing.

Whether you find that kind of love and devotion with the family you were born into, or if you have built it with the people who are dearest to you—it is a beautiful thing.

It is beautiful, but it's also undergirded with the steel that Joash shows that mob.

There is no question in my mind that Joash was not to be moved—

And that his neighbors knew it.

I pray that it never comes to that, but if I am ever put in the position where I need to stand up for the people I love—my family—that I might find that same steel lies in me.

And that I'm as able to deescalate the situation, so that steel never needs to be used.

And that's my prayer for you, too.

What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

The source material is very strange for a worship service, I know. But this is still a beautiful song about protecting one another.

<https://youtu.be/VQVxk5TD4lI?si=iGwg2h7zAqNBs-2J>, "Not While I'm Around" ~from Sweeney Todd (2023 Broadway Cast Recording)

Nothing's gonna harm you

Not while I'm around

Nothing's gonna harm you

No, sir

Not while I'm around

Demons are prowling everywhere, nowadays

I'll send them howling

I don't care, I got ways

Of course you do

What a sweet, affectionate child it is

No one's gonna hurt you
No one's gonna dare
Others can desert you
Not to worry
Whistle, I'll be there
Demons'll charm you with a smile, for a while
But in time, nothing can harm you
Not while I'm around
What is this foolishness? What are you talking 'bout?
Not to worry, not to worry
I may not be smart but I ain't dumb
I can do it, put me to it
Show me something I can overcome
Not to worry, mum
Being close and being clever
Ain't like being true
I don't need to, I would never hide a thing from you
Like some
Now, Toby, dear
Haven't we had enough foolish chatter?
Let's just sit nice and quiet for a bit
Nothing's gonna harm you
Not while I'm around
Nothing's gonna harm you, darling
Not while I'm around
Demons are prowling everywhere, nowadays
I'll send them howling
I don't care
Boys and their fancies! What will we think of next?
No one's gonna hurt you
No one's gonna dare
Others can desert you
Not to worry
Whistle, I'll be there
Demons will charm you with a smile, for a while
But in time, nothing's gonna harm you
Not while I'm around

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:

Spirit of the Living God, move in us, stir in us, call upon us out of our sleep to be awake.

Awaken us to the cries of injustice and despair and help us to respond.

Awaken us to what You are doing in our world and in our lives and guide us in harmony with Your work.

Awaken us to the promise of new life and help us to live into that truth for one another.

For in You we live, move, and have our being, Spirit of Life.

Fall fresh upon us, mold us and make us into who You desire us to be.

In the name of the Son, the Living One, we pray.

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:

Today we left off with Gideon being taken over by the Spirit of the Lord and gearing up for battle.

When I think of popular culture with the theme of finding something inside of yourself that drives you forward into battle, my mind turns to the scene from the 1994 film, The Crow featuring this song:

<https://youtu.be/iN5KUdntxGJQ?si=Qu4qG6hmDeu3QhY->, "Burn" ~The Cure

"Don't look don't look" the shadows breathe

Whispering me away from you

"Don't wake at night to watch her sleep
You know that you will always lose
This trembling
Adored
Tousled bird mad girl"
But every night I burn
But every night I call your name
Every night I burn
Every night I fall again
"Oh don't talk of love" the shadows purr
Murmuring me away from you
"Don't talk of worlds that never were
The end is all that's ever true
There's nothing you can ever say
Nothing you can ever do"
Still every night I burn
Every night I scream your name
Every night I burn
Every night the dream's the same
Every night I burn
Waiting for my only friend
Every night I burn
Waiting for the world to end
"Just paint your face" the shadows smile
Slipping me away from you
"Oh it doesn't matter how you hide
Find you if we're wanting to
So slide back down and close your eyes
Sleep a while
You must be tired"
But every night I burn
Every night I call your name
Every night I burn
Every night I fall again
Every night I burn
Scream the animal scream
Every night I burn
Dream the crow black dream
Every night I burn
Scream the animal scream
Every night I burn
Dream the crow black dream
Dream the crow black dream
Dream the crow black dream
Dream the crow black dream
Dream the crow black dream

end