

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'll be starting with a scene from one of my all time favorite movies growing up, not because it's a favorite—

Ok, not only because it's a favorite. But also because it says something pretty profound about the way I prefer to approach conflict.

So, please pay attention to the conflict and see if you can identify where the turning point is that resolves it.

<https://youtu.be/dFAwRulOnPc?si=ojh5PUXmd8UIzUMM>, ~A Scene from Jim Henson's Labyrinth

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 6:32-40

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.

Then Gideon said to God, 'In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing-floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said.'

And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water.

Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.'

And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

SERMON "Gideon and the Fleece"

Today we continue the story of Gideon as it is told in the book of Judges. The story begins in a stereotypically Biblical way.

In Dungeons & Dragons, the stereotypical beginning of a story is, "You all meet in a tavern..." In Gothic Horror, it is "It was a dark and stormy night..."

In the Bible, it is "An angel of the Lord appears..." to the least likely hero. The angel then gives the poor guy—it's usually a man, but not always—a message from God instructing him to go do something heroic.

Our hero says, "Who, me? No, I'm not the right person for the job. I'm not good enough."

Then God says, "Actually, you are the guy. Your shortcomings do not matter. I will be with you. You are the one."

What makes the beginning of Gideon's story unique 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 the angel accommodates him with the sign he asked for. And that 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!

Knowing how his story began, and what his reaction to that beginning was, makes me just a little bit surprised at this next part of the story.

He is “possessed” by the Spirit of the Lord and begins assembling troops from various Jewish tribes.

I always imagine an A-Team montage, or the scene from the film adaptation of The Crow where he puts on the makeup and the black outfit for the first time.

And thus geared up for battle, he asks God for another sign.

Really?

Apparently so! This is a different situation, though, and a different sign. In the beginning of his story, Gideon asks for a sign that God is who They say They are.

In this case, Gideon asks God, “Are you going to do what you said you would?”

In other words, if I take these troops into war with Midian, who have been raiding us into the ground—will we win?

That’s a whole different question, and there are a couple of things about it that I find interesting.

First, Gideon chooses a sign that takes time. He lays a fleece on the ground to see where the morning dew collects.

One would expect dew to cover both the ground and the fleece. Gideon asks God to cause dew to collect only on the fleece.

So there’s a night and a morning at least, if not a full 24 hours before the sign can be interpreted—and I think that’s really cool.

I think that war is not something we should enter into lightly, or quickly.

Of course, the sign is positive and abundant—the fleece has so much dew on it that it is soaked! Gideon wrings a whole bowl-full out of it.

The second thing that’s interesting about the sign of the fleece is that Gideon is a little scientific about it!

I don’t know how dew works, exactly, but it might be possible that it lingers on fleece longer than it does on the ground. Or maybe the fleece sucks up the ground moisture like a sponge, or—

Ok, God, don’t get angry, but... One more time, but the other way around. This time, let the fleece be dry and the ground wet.

And it is so.

I pointed out earlier that Gideon is asking a different kind of question of God and that this is therefore a different situation than the sign asked for and received at the beginning of his story.

This question is, “Do you really want us to go to battle? If we start up this war, will we win?”

And there are lots of places in the Bible where human beings use signs to discern what God wants.

There’s a good example in the story of the prophet, Jonah. You remember Jonah, the one who was swallowed by some huge sea creature and then spewed up onto the shore.

His story starts with God telling him to do something nice for some people he hated—and Jonah told him, “no” and tried to run in the opposite direction.

Then a great storm rises up and the ship he’s on is tossed so hard that the sailors attribute it to the anger of some god or other.

The use a system of interpreting signs called “casting lots” to discern that Jonah is the problem and throw him overboard.

Jonah, meet sea creature!

More specifically, there are a lot of examples of various military leaders interpreting signs for exactly the same questions that Gideon has, “Do you want us to fight those people over there? Will we win?”

There’s an example of this in the story of David, as Saul is trying to find him and kill him—but only if you understand the traditions of that time and place:

“When Abiathar son of Ahimelech fled to David at Keilah, he came down with an ephod in his hand.

Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, ‘God has given him into my hand; for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars.’ Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men.

When David learned that Saul was plotting evil against him, he said to the priest Abiathar, ‘Bring the ephod here.’

David said, ‘O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account.

And now, will Saul come down as your servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, I beseech you, tell your servant.’

The Lord said, ‘He will come down.’

Then David said, ‘Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?’

The Lord said, ‘They will surrender you.’

Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, set out and left Keilah; they wandered wherever they could go.

When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition. David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the Wilderness of Ziph. Saul sought him every day, but the Lord did not give him into his hand.” (I Samuel 23:6-14)

In this case, David is probably not speaking directly to God and receiving a direct answer—that’s that the ephod was for.

It was a priestly garment associated with two sacred objects called “Urim” and “Thummim” which were used—you guessed it!—for casting lots.

With them, you could ask God simple yes-or-no or this-or-that questions—it was the ancient Jewish version of “knockonce for ‘yes’ and twice for ‘no.’”

Of course, David and the Ephod come much later—Gideon and his fleece will have to do for now.

What are we to do with all of this? Well—I already touched on one thing: War is serious. Violence should be a last resort.

And I think that slowing things down and taking things seriously can be a very important decision-making process.

Another lesson we can walk away with is this: asking the right questions can be very important. In fact, asking the right questions can change everything.

That’s why I opened worship with that scene from Jim Henson’s *Labyrinth*. The solution to their problem was taking the time to talk things through—and asking the right question—“Well... May we have your permission?”

As thrilled I am by the unspoken questions about the behavior of dew as it relates

to ground and fleece that Gideon tests for—I think that the most important question in this story is actually, “What do you want, God?”

In this story, God wants Their people to stand up for themselves—to literally fight against the oppression of the Midianites.

There is a time and a season for everything. Even war.

I hope and pray that each of us asks God that same question, “What do You want?” before we decide when enough is enough.

I hope and pray that each of us asks God “What do You want?” as we decide to stand against oppression.

I hope and pray that each of us asks God “What do You want?” before deciding if, when, and how to fight.

And I hope and pray that we listen as carefully as Gideon to the answers.

What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

There are a lot of songs which ask questions. But this one not only asks a question, but also stands up for the humanity of the songwriter in no uncertain terms.

And that feels very much like the mood of the passage we just explored together.

<https://youtu.be/hnpILIIo9ek?si=Oh8FsILFYORg02Vo>, “How Soon Is Now?” ~The Smiths

I am the son

And the heir

Of a shyness that is criminally vulgar

I am the son and heir

Of nothing in particular

You shut your mouth

How can you say

I go about things the wrong way?

I am human and I need to be loved

Just like everybody else does

I am the son

And the heir

Of a shyness that is criminally vulgar

I am the son and heir

Of nothing in particular

You shut your mouth

How can you say

I go about things the wrong way?

I am human and I need to be loved

Just like everybody else does

There's a club if you'd like to go

You could meet somebody who really loves you

So you go and you stand on your own

And you leave on your own

And you go home and you cry

And you want to die

When you say it's gonna happen now

When exactly do you mean?

See I've already waited too long

And all my hope is gone

You shut your mouth
How can you say
I go about things the wrong way?
I am human and I need to be loved
Just like everybody else does

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:

God of Great Compassion, Your love for us is overwhelming.

When we stand at the shore and look out at as far as we can see, Your love is greater still.

When we stand and gaze up at the night sky, at the stars of the Milky Way, even through a telescope we cannot know all that You have made.

You are too wondrous, too amazing for us to comprehend.

Yet we have known You through the stories passed down to us, the words of prophets and singers and sages, our ancestors of the faith, the church elders who have taught us.

We know You in the whisper of wind, the sap rising in the trees, the wings of butterflies and eagles.

We know You in the smell of a newborn baby's head, their cries and laughter.

We know You in the last breaths of our loved ones returning to You, in the earth and air and water we have come from.

You are amazing, compassionate, merciful, and so beyond what we can ever know, and yet we have a glimpse of You in our lives.

We are grateful for the simple threads we can follow, the hint of trails that lead to deeper understanding, every clue You have left for us imprinted in the universe and in our heart.

We thank You and praise You, Great and Merciful God, full of compassion, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.

Amen, and 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:

Gideon's story—in fact all of the book of Judges—has a lot of darkness and war in it.

But this piece is about finding other ways to help—and asks a visionary question!

<https://youtu.be/XoKFBjd5-F8?si=YH1fJdvU1ZcS5vT2>, “Can You Picture That?” ~Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem Band

Oh-yeah

Woo! Alright!

Everybody's lover, everybody's brother

I wanna be your lifetime friend

Crazy as a rocket, there's nothin' in my pocket

I keep it at the rainbow's end

I never think of money, I think of milk and honey

Grinnin' like a Cheshire cat

I focus on the pleasure, somethin' I can treasure

Can you picture that?

Can you picture that?

Oh-yeah (that's right!)

Hey, Floyd, take a verse!

You got it

Let me take your picture, add it to the mixture

There it is, I gotcha now

Really nothin' to it, anyone can do it

It's easy and we all know how

Now begins the changin', mental rearrangin'

Nothing's really where it's at

But now the Eiffel Tower's holdin' up a flower

I gave it to a Texas cat

Fact is there's nothin' out there you can't do

Yeah, even Santa Claus believes in you

Beat down the walls, begin, believe, be begat
Be a better drummer (ay), be an up-and-comer!
Can you picture that?
Can you picture that? Yeah
Can you picture that?
Can you picture that?
All of us are winnin', pickin' and-a grinnin'
Lordy, but I love to jam
Oh, wow, jelly-belly gigglin', dancin' and-a wigglin'
Honey, that's the way I am, oh-yeah
I lost my heart in Texas, northern lights affect us
I keep it underneath my hat
Aurora borealis shinin' down on Dallas
Can you picture that?
Can you picture that?
Can you picture? (You gotta see it in your mind)
Can you picture? (You know, it's quick and easy to find)
Can you picture? (You don't have to buy a frame)
Can you picture?
Can you picture that?
Can you picture that?
Use it if you need it (don't forget to feed it)
Can you picture that?
Oh, wow, like, can you, like, totally get behind it?
Fer sher, really!

end