

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:

In today's lesson we see God—through Gideon and a relatively small fighting force—use a kind of psychological warfare.

Which reminds me of this classic comic book character:

<https://youtu.be/8aGtHBHx7HU?si=S0z1QCUJ9txBJSvr>, “ ~A Scene from \_Batman Begins\_

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](http://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 7

Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the troops that were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod; and the camp of Midian was north of them, below the hill of Moreh, in the valley.

The Lord said to Gideon, 'The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, "My own hand has delivered me."'

Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, "Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home." '

Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained.

Then the Lord said to Gideon, 'The troops are still too many; take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you there.

When I say, "This one shall go with you", he shall go with you; and when I say, "This one shall not go with you", he shall not go.'

So he brought the troops down to the water; and the Lord said to Gideon, 'All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths, you shall put to the other side.'

The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water.

Then the Lord said to Gideon, 'With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go to their homes.'

So he took the jars of the troops from their hands, and their trumpets; and he sent all the rest of Israel back to their own tents, but retained the three hundred. The camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

That same night the Lord said to him, 'Get up, attack the camp; for I have given it into your hand.

But if you fear to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah; and you shall hear what they say, and afterwards your hands shall be strengthened to attack the camp.'

Then he went down with his servant Purah to the outposts of the armed men that were in the camp.

The Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the east lay along the valley as thick as locusts; and their camels were without number, countless as the sand on the seashore.

When Gideon arrived, there was a man telling a dream to his comrade; and he said, 'I had a dream, and in it a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent, and struck it so that it fell; it turned upside down, and the tent collapsed.'

And his comrade answered, 'This is no other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, a man of Israel; into his hand God has given Midian and all the army.'

When Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshipped; and he returned to the camp of Israel, and said, 'Get up; for the Lord has given the army of Midian into your hand.'

After he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and put trumpets into the hands of all of them, and empty jars, with torches inside the jars, he said to them,

'Look at me, and do the same; when I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets around the whole camp, and shout, "For the Lord and for Gideon!"'

So Gideon and the hundred who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands.

So the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars, holding in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow; and they cried, 'A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!'

Every man stood in his place all around the camp, and all the men in camp ran; they cried out and fled.

When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah towards Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath.

And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after the Midianites.

Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, 'Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters against them, as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan.'

So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they seized the waters as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan.

They captured the two captains of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the wine press of Zeeb, as they pursued the Midianites.

They brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon beyond the Jordan.

#### SERMON "God and Signs"

I know, that was a long passage, but I honestly didn't see a good place to break up that narrative.

Well, no good place thematically speaking—more on that in a little bit.

First I want to kind of sum up how that first battle went, because I will admit that the first time I read it through, there were some things that weren't clear to me. What happened was this: Gideon and 300 soldiers, under the cover of darkness, each lit a torch and hid it in a ceramic jar. Each of them also carried a horn and, I assume, wore a sword on their hip.

Finally, Gideon instructed them to all use the same battle-cry when the time came. Gideon himself was the signal to attack, "Just do what I do, when I do it."

So, the 300 men stealthily moved down into the valley and surrounded the Midianite army. Once they were all in position, they threw down their jars, breaking them. Now—imagine if you will that you are a Midianite soldier. It's nighttime. You're asleep.

Then you are awakened by the sound of 300 clay jars shattering around you! You open your eyes to witness the light of 300 torches rising from the ground! 300 horns sound at once, deafening you!

What the actual what is going on??

You are absolutely surrounded by a battle-cry, "For the Lord and for Gideon!"

In approximately 6 seconds you went from sleep to we're-all-gonna-die terror.

That is what Gideon and his 300 men accomplished in this story. And as fun as that surprise attack is to visualize, it's probably not the most interesting thing about this story.

What I find most interesting is the way that God's relationship to Their people is slowly evolving.

At the beginning of Gideon's story, God starts off by telling the Israelites about the powerful signs of old-how God rescued them from slavery and then decided to go their own way.

Then an angel appears to him and says, "God is with you, mighty warrior."

And Gideon says, "Really? It sure doesn't seem like God is with us. Give me a sign."

And then, later, Gideon asks for more signs to be sure that he understands what, exactly, God wants from him.

And, finally, the elaborate sneak attack is also a sign given to the Midianites.

The sign is not unlike the one carefully crafted by Bruce Wayne as he created the symbol known simply as the Batman:

That's what I wanted to show you in the scene I opened worship with; how striking fear in the hearts of your opponents can be it's own kind of sign.

Do not go up against the Lord of Gideon!

Earlier I said that I saw a theme in this long passage that caused me to not break it up into two shorter pieces.

That is because in this long passage, I notice that Gideon does not ask for signs—because God gives them without anyone asking first.

The point of that whole business about filtering down the army to fewer and fewer people was to make it absolutely clear to the Israelites that it is God who is saving them.

In other words, Gideon is helping God to give all of his people a sign.

And then, once Gideon has done that step, God immediately gives Gideon a sign that yes, this is exactly what They want him to do.

It seems to me that the needs of God's people have evolved over time, that God has learned what these new needs are, and is taking steps to provide for those needs before they even express them.

And yes, that means that God changes with us. Evolves with us.

That idea might be surprising to you—I'm sure that there are corners of Christianity that would argue vehemently against the idea—but based on my reading of the Bible, I find it to be true.

And if my understanding of history is correct, it wasn't until Christianity and the Roman Empire kind of absorbed each other that the idea of God as unmovable and unchanging came into being.

It has something to do with Classical philosophy which isn't really important to what I'm trying to say—

And what I'm trying to say is that the relationship that our religious ancestors had with God changed and evolved over time, just like any relationship.

I think that's important to know. And I think it's a good thing.

Ours is not a God of stagnation and death. Ours is the Living God.

What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

In many ways the Book of Judges is about God and the people of God working on their relationship together.

So is this song.

<https://youtu.be/nin-fiNz50M?si=rTCIaehYqntdxTn>, "Don't Wanna Fight" ~Alabama Shakes

My life, your life

Don't cross them lines

What you like, what I like

Why can't we both be right?

Attacking, defending

Until there's nothing left worth winning

Your pride and my pride

Don't waste my time

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more, I

Take from my hand

Put in your hands

The fruit of all my grief

Lying down ain't easy

When everyone is pleasing

I can't get no relief

Living ain't no fun

The constant dedication

Keeping the water and power on

There ain't nobody left

Why can't I catch my breath?

I'm gonna work myself to death

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more, I

No, no, no, no!

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight, I don't wanna fight!

I don't wanna fight no more

I don't wanna fight no more  
I don't wanna fight no more  
I don't wanna fight no more  
I don't wanna fight no more  
I don't wanna fight no more  
I don't wanna fight no more  
I don't wanna fight no more

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:

INSERT (Rev-o-lution Resources by Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell

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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:

The Israelites were meant to be with God, so I thought I'd send you out into the world with the exuberant feeling of finding someone you love.

I think this song does precisely that.

<https://youtu.be/6JCLY0Rlx6Q?si=-Cd1yuUjX5pcq8Dc>, "Shut Up And Dance" ~WALK THE MOON

"Oh, don't you dare look back

Just keep your eyes on me."

I said, "You're holding back."

She said, "Shut up and dance with me!"

This woman is my destiny

She said, "Ooh-ooh-hoo

Shut up and dance with me."

We were victims of the night

The chemical, physical, kryptonite

Helpless to the bass and the fading light

Oh, we were bound to get together

Bound to get together

She took my arm

I don't know how it happened

We took the floor and she said

"Oh, don't you dare look back

Just keep your eyes on me."

I said, "You're holding back."

She said, "Shut up and dance with me!"

This woman is my destiny

She said, "Ooh-ooh-hoo

Shut up and dance with me."

A backless dress and some beat-up sneaks

My discothèque Juliet, teenage dream

I felt it in my chest as she looked at me

I knew we were bound to be together

Bound to be together

She took my arm

I don't know how it happened

We took the floor and she said

"Oh, don't you dare look back

Just keep your eyes on me."

I said, "You're holding back."

She said, "Shut up and dance with me!"

This woman is my destiny

She said, "Ooh-ooh-hoo

Shut up and dance with me."

Oh, come on girl

Deep in her eyes  
I think I see the future  
I realize this is my last chance

She took my arm  
I don't know how it happened  
We took the floor and she said

"Oh, don't you dare look back  
Just keep your eyes on me."  
I said, "You're holding back."  
She said, "Shut up and dance with me!"  
This woman is my destiny  
She said, "Ooh-ooh-hoo  
Shut up and dance!"

"Don't you dare look back  
Just keep your eyes on me."  
I said, "You're holding back."  
She said, "Shut up and dance with me!"  
This woman is my destiny  
She said, "Ooh-ooh-hoo  
Shut up and dance with me."

Ooh-ooh-hoo, shut up and dance with me  
Ooh-ooh-hoo, shut up and dance with me

\*end\*