

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:

For me, today is very much about transitions. I am getting ready to start my new Chaplain position with Yale-New Haven Hospital. Which means that this church is getting ready for me to relinquish this service and go back to occasionally preaching on Sundays.

Don't worry, there will still be something on Fridays, run by our very own Yadi!

And, at the time of this writing, I have just learned that Pastor Jerome died during the night last Sunday.

One of the last things he said to me was "no moping about," and I take comfort in the fact that he had a Hospice team to help him make his last days as close to what he wanted them to be as possible.

As he frequently prayed with us, "the best that can be, will be."

I don't frequently bring this up, but Jer isn't here to do it any more—I was actually his first clergy volunteer for this ministry. And I will be forever grateful that he gave me the room to be creative with these worship services.

So, in honor of this ministry that Jer founded, let's start tonight's worship with a piece that inspired the style of worship that I share with you here.

<https://youtu.be/VPpd-6X3tEo?si=W1rk4zb0Zd3PndDU>, "I Will Follow Him" ~a scene from Sister Act

Love him, I love him, I love him

And where he goes I'll follow, I'll follow, I'll follow

I will follow him

Follow him wherever he may go

There isn't an ocean too deep

A mountain so high it can keep me away

I must follow him (follow him)

Ever since he touched my hand I knew

That near him I always must be

And nothing can keep him from me

He is my destiny (destiny)

I love him, I love him, I love him

And where he goes I'll follow, I'll follow, I'll follow

He'll always be my true love, my true love, my true love

From now until forever, forever, forever

I will follow him (follow him)

Follow him wherever he may go

There isn't an ocean too deep

A mountain so high it can keep, keep me away
Away from my love (I love him, I love him, I love him)
I love him, I love him, I love him
And where he goes I'll follow, I'll follow, I'll follow
He'll always be my true love, my true love, my true love
From now until forever, forever, forever
I will follow him (follow him)
Follow him wherever he may go
There isn't an ocean too deep
A mountain so high it can keep, keep me away
Away from my love
And where he goes I'll follow, I'll follow, I'll follow
I know I'll always love him, I love him, I love him
And where he goes I'll follow, I'll follow, I'll follow
I know I'll always love him, I love him, I love him
And where he goes I'll follow

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 2:1-5 & 16-19

Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, 'I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, "I will never break my covenant with you. For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars."

But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done!

So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you.'

When the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the Israelites, the people lifted up their voices and wept.

So they named that place Bochim, and there they sacrificed to the Lord.

Then the Lord raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them.

Yet they did not listen even to their judges; for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them.

They soon turned aside from the way in which their ancestors had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord; they did not follow their example.

Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the Lord would be moved to pity by their groaning because of those who persecuted and oppressed them.

But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshipping them and bowing down to them.

They would not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways.

2 Kings 24:18-20 & 2 Kings 25:7

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign; he reigned for eleven years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, just as Jehoiakim had done. Indeed, Jerusalem and Judah so angered the Lord that he expelled them from his presence. Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon.

They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, then put out the eyes of Zedekiah; they bound him in fetters and took him to Babylon.

Mark 14:22-24

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.'

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it.

He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many...'

SERMON "Covenants"

There is an old saying—I don't know where it comes from—that says, "We plan and God

laughs.”

I was planning on working our way all the way through the Book of Judges together, and then at the end working with the overarching themes.

And then, by God’s grace, the hard work and patience I have given to Yale-New Haven Health as a Chaplain led to a full-time position which conflicts with the timing of this service.

I’ll be preaching every so often for the Sunday service, but I have to let this one go.

All of that to say: I’ve run out of time for this sermon series! So—let’s have a look at the overarching themes.

Most, if not all of you, have read a lesson or two during this series and I suspect that you might have noticed a pattern.

Today’s lesson states it outright: God and the Jewish people made a Covenant together: The people worship God and only Them—like a monogamous marriage—and in return God provides them with a home.

God is with the people as they invade and conquer, fulfilling Their part of the bargain. Just as soon as they’re settled, however, the people begin worshiping the local gods.

God gets angry, lets the indigenous people come back in and kick the Israelites around for a while.

When they get desperate enough to turn back to God, They send a Judge, who helps to drive out the indigenous people again and then rules the Israelites, who live happily ever after.

Just kidding. Eventually the Judge in question makes the same old mistakes, or more often the Judge dies and the people backslide, starting the cycle all over again. And that’s basically the plot of the Book of Judges. That cycle over and over and over again.

A long while back, I did a sermon series about King David and we learned about how the Israelites decided to break out of that cycle by transitioning away from Judges and into a monarchy.

It didn’t work.

The cycle continued, except with kings in leadership. Some of them were good, many of them bad, until finally the last one “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord”—

a phrase that we see in that repeating cycle that started in Judges—and the monarchy fell to what is now known as the Babylonian exile.

People today are no better.

This is what American Christian Nationalists are so up in arms about; they say that if the United States government doesn’t use its power to enforce Christian morals, God will tear down the country.

I disagree with the stance on several fronts, but the one that strikes me the hardest is the sheer hypocrisy—if Americans in the United States are worshiping idols, then those little gods are named The Gun, The Flag, and Capitalism.

More insidiously, I see Christian Nationalists worshiping idols with names like Biblical Inerrancy which sound like legitimate study and interpretation but avoid all the places in the text which challenge their pre-conceived notions.

Oh yes, making an idol out of the Bible and worshiping your own views is an insidious one, indeed.

Maybe we should be worried that God will smite the whole country.

Except.

Except that, as I pointed out in last week's sermon, the relationship between God and the Israelites did evolve over time.

Just like any relationship, it had ups and downs, but let's be honest: both sides worked at it. And relationships are work.

They require authenticity and honesty and communication and forgiveness. And forgiveness. And forgiveness.

It would have been so easy for God to only remember the fights and not the good times, but ours is a God of forgiveness!

To only focus on the bad times is to read only half of the story.

Still. There is an awful lot of smiting, too. Maybe we should be worried that God will smite the whole country out of hand.

Except.

Except that I'm a Christian.

That horrifying cycle of "the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," the smiting, the people crying out, God saving them, "the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," and so on and so forth—

That was an old covenant. Those were the original marriage vows. They clearly didn't work.

As a Christian, I have entered into a new covenant.

The covenant of Jesus grew out of that old covenant, to be sure.

It is very much like the members of a floundering marriage might go to counseling and change and evolve to the point where they renew that relationship with new vows.

And I don't mean to be flippant—I hope I come across as deadly serious—because Jesus tells us that his body, his blood, his life is the way to this new covenant.

And there is nothing more important than that.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

In the Gospel of Matthew, what that implies is spelled out, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

In the Gospel of John, Jesus gives us a new commandment—that we should love one another.

So, no—I am not worried that God will smite my beloved homeland. Otherwise, what did Jesus die for?

And why did God raise him up?

Neither my heart nor my head can reconcile Christian Nationalism with the teachings of Jesus regarding judgement, his sacrifice, or the promise of the Resurrection.

I am a Christian, living in the New Covenant. I strive to be curious instead of judgmental.

And when I fall short, I do so in the knowledge that the price has already been paid for my sins. I do so knowing the Grace of God. And I get up and try again.

What do you say? Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

In today's lesson we find a cycle of sin and violence and redemption that is, quiet

frankly, more than a little dark—but with a little effort one can find the light in it.

This song catches that feeling just fine.

https://youtu.be/Vh8mzj_7xto?si=mmBF0BvGnog_yULm, “String of Pearls” ~Soul Asylum

She swings

A string

Of pearls on the corner

The streelight reflects

The light on the water

The string, it snaps

And the pearls go sailing

And they splash

And bounce

And roll cross the wet street

As she bends to chase the pearls

A car swings round the corner

She darts from the eyes

Of the panic struck driver

Who's racing to

The delivery room

'Cause in the backseat his wife

Is busting out of her womb

The sack breaks and out come the siamese twins

Who grow up to become

The first president with two heads

Are better than one

He puts his heads in his hands,

Says I gotta put my heads together

I can become the Best President Ever

And not just president

Fend for yourself

Signs his name takes the blame

For all of the names with no shame

In their belief they adjourn

And the leave

And in walks a man

With a broom, and a knife

And blood on his hands

And he sweeps everything

Under the rug

And goes home

To his kids, gives them a hug

But his wife was not there, she had just left a letter

That said you'll be much

Better off without me

Now his wife took the train

To her ex-lovers funeral

Who died in the bathroom,
Hit his head on a urinal
When they got together, the knowledge was carnal
And the widow was at the funeral, and they had quite a catfight
And they fell into the grave where the casket was resting
And the preacher just left in the middle of the service
'Cause death was one thing,
But women made him nervous
And he got into his car,
And he drove round the corner

Then something in the street
Caught the light in his eye
He pulled over, reached down
And picked up the pearl from the gutter
He didn't know what to think
He brought it home and washed it in the sink
And he gave the pearl
To Sister Mary Theresa
Who could not accept it,
So she gave it to Lisa
A young prostitute who was missing a pearl
on the necklace that broke
Late last night

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 the tides, God of the changing seasons, at this time of year we take notice of what is being let go of and what is clinging to our hearts.

The pang of loved ones gone rests on our hearts.

As we prepare for upcoming holidays, remind us to be gentle with ourselves, to give ourselves time and space for grief and for rest.

For grief, like tides, ebbs and flows, but never ceases.

Gracious God, love us gently in this season, so we might experience Your grace and gratitude.

Refresh our minds with Your wisdom by helping us recall Your scriptures and stories and songs of old.

Restore us with the knowledge that even long seasons will change and unfold into something new.

For You remain with us, now and always, Eternal Spirit. Amen. (Adapted from 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:

We started with the idea of transitions—of beginnings and endings and beginnings—which always remind me of this song: “For the first time in my life I’m not afraid, ‘cause there’s nothing in this world that doesn’t change.”

<https://youtu.be/LejEjFxiRUQ?si=fcH2fnvsEuK-6k7J>, “Goodnight” ~Zox

Goodnight

To the city and the sea

To the strangers in the street

Goodnight

To the ghosts out in the hall

The paint peelin' off the walls

Goodnight

Sometimes I

Stand between the sidewalk and the sky

And just stare into the clouds as they pass by

You have to leave the ground to learn to fly

Goodnight

To the TV and the clocks

To the rain that never stops

Goodnight

To everyone I know

Shut my eyes and let 'em go

Goodnight

Sometimes I

Stand between the sidewalk and the sky

And just stare into the clouds as they pass by

You have to leave the ground to learn to fly

There is something beautiful

Dying everyday

For the first time in my life I'm not afraid

'Cause there's nothing in this world that doesn't change

And goodnight

To the person I have been

To the place that I am in

Goodnight

Tomorrow hello to the sun

Are you ready? Here I come

Goodnight

Sometimes I

Stand between the sidewalk and the sky

And just stare into the clouds as they pass by

You have to leave the ground to learn to fly

You have to leave the ground to learn to fly

end