

WELCOME

Welcome!

Grace and Peace be with you in the name of the Holy-One-of-All!
Thank you for coming! We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us today.

It gives me great joy to tell you that
First United Church of Christ and Conference Center is
a church with full real life standing in the Eastern Association;
Southern California Nevada Conference of the
United Church of Christ (UCC).

Our service will be in voice and text.
Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have voice and media turned
on.

If you don't know how to do that, let someone know and we'll try to help.
There will be a link in Nearby Chat so you can watch it in your browser if the
viewer isn't working for you.

If you would like a bulletin for today's service you can find it in the red binder
in the back along with a donation bowl.

And as a real UCC church, we'd like you to know that
"No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.

One of the blessings and responsibilities that come with
our being a real church with real standing is that we, like all UCC churches,
support the work of the national church not only with prayer
but financially.

So we greatly appreciate any offering you can make to support this ministry.
If you prefer, donations can be made on our website, firstuccsl.org.

My name is Rev. Yadi Martínez-Reyna, I am one of the Pastors in this community.
And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

Tonight we have a special preacher our own beloved Doug who will be bringing us the
message of hope and good news.
Thank you Doug!

This month of November we come with hearts of thanksgiving.
This upcoming week of November 20th is Transgender Day of Remembrance.
Now more than ever we lift our collective prayers for our siblings.

Would you pray with me?
Come Holy Spirit and fill this place with your presence.
As we gather on this day may your bless our lives.

We pray for those here today and those who are not here but are part of our community, our family, your church, your children.
May all honor and glory be yours now and forever.

Amen

And now for our gathering music.

If there are any announcements about the life of the church please share with us while our gathering music plays.

GATHERING MUSIC

Lauren Daigle - Then I Will (From The Motion Picture Bonhoeffer)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKBQrWWX570>

Scriptures and Sermon - Doug

The Call of Paul

Acts 9

1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest

2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.

8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.

9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus what named Saul, for he is praying.

12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem.

14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go!
This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings
and to the people of Israel.
16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."
17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it.
Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to
you on the road as you were coming here—
has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."
18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again.
He got up and was baptized,
19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Will you please pray with me?
May the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of my heart,
be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.
Amen

Who was Paul?
Paul was a tent-maker.
Paul was passionate, articulate.
Paul was attributed to be the author of a 13 books of the NT, about 25% of the NT
He went on several long journeys to many towns and cities.
He would preach often, telling the news of Jesus.
He would check in on churches in those towns, to educate and chastise as necessary.

Paul described himself as a Hebrew among Hebrews, a Pharisee of Pharisees.
Paul was well educated, and progressed faster than other men his age.
He was highly trained in Jewish theology and Scripture.
The Hebrew Scriptures recount how the Jewish people struggled with staying separate
from the cultures of the people who enslaved them,
as well as the cultures of people they conquered.
Paul became zealous about protecting the faith he believed in.

We first hear of Paul, then called Saul, early in the book of Acts.
He was present at the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr, and approved of his
killing.
He vigorously persecuted the early church,
entering house after house and dragging off both men and women,
sending them to prison and potential execution.
In the reading from Acts above we see he intended to continue this persecution in
Damascus,
and it is reasonable to assume that he was planning on traveling far and wide
to eradicate what he saw as a threat to the Jewish faith.

He was so zealous that his reputation preceded him wherever he went.
For example, Ananias knew he was coming to Damascus to search out and arrest more
followers of Jesus.

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Paul was a man of passion, well-known, well-respected, well-feared.
Paul was also a man who later said that he considered his life as nothing compared to glory of knowing Christ Jesus.
Ironically Paul later did in fact travel far and wide, spreading the news of Jesus, becoming like the people he persecuted.

Same guy, believe it or not!

I can very much relate to this before-and-after.
I grew up in the church, but was very disillusioned.
I saw hypocrisy.
Worshiping God in on Sunday, then cutting folks off getting out of the parking lot.
Things like that.

Later in life I realized my disillusionment came mostly from growing up in an alcoholic family,
coping with the bizarre changes from day-to-day, even hour-to-hour.
The church became the target for this disillusionment.

I became an atheist in late high school, and remained so for 18 years.
While an atheist I fought the church.
Not in the way of Saul, but more like to prevent being drawn back to the church.
I knew without a doubt that God did not exist, and nothing could convince me otherwise.
I had all the answers.
You could say I was a devout atheist!

It took a couple of personal upheavals, coming almost simultaneously, to open me up a little to a life of faith.
It felt like I had been living in a fog which was slowly dissipating.
That got me on a Tres Dias Weekend, where I saw the love of God that I had not seen before.

Coming back wasn't easy, in fact it was 4 more years before I actually began going to church.
But the shell was opened, the light was creeping in.

I faced the loss of my brother at age 21.
I was an atheist then and it was a hard experience.
I was so confused, trying to make sense of it all.
I struggled about his plans for the coming weeks.
What would become of those?
It made no sense.
I couldn't work it out alone.

In the years after coming back to the church I went through several divorces, the loss of three mothers-in-law, a sister-in-law, my mother, my baby sis, my father.
But I had God with me.
It was still hard, I still struggled.
But it wasn't anywhere near as hard as doing it alone.

Back to Paul's journey to Damascus.

Paul was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus with permission from the Jewish leaders to continue his crusade against Christians there.

The journey to Damascus was about 140 miles, and took about a week or so, 20 miles of walking per day.

He was almost there when Jesus appeared to him, started him on his conversion..

Paul, now blind, continued his journey to Damascus, being led by the hand.

The fire-breathing dragon was now a timid mouse.

No longer leading, but being led.

Soon he is in Damascus trying to reconcile what he experienced with what he believed.

What he had experienced blew him away.

It was well beyond his understanding, beyond anything he could explain away.

For three days he pondered what happened.

He couldn't see, didn't eat or drink, and I suspect he didn't sleep much either.

The Jesus who he thought was dead and gone was in fact alive.

If Jesus was alive then what the Christians were claiming was indeed true, not blasphemy.

Jesus might in fact be the long-awaited Messiah.

Paul had to rethink everything he had ever believed in.

Rethink who he was.

What Judaism was all about.

Who God really was.

It was a time of upheaval for Paul.

But when Ananias came to him it appears he was ready.

In short order he was preaching Jesus as strongly as he had been persecuting Jesus.

Life was good, right?

In a way you could say so.

Paul was spreading the good news, starting churches, supporting churches, chastising churches, in love.

He had a few minor roadblocks along the way.

He was imprisoned multiple times.

He was beaten.

He was stoned, twice.

He was shipwrecked.

He was abandoned.

Did that stop him, did he lose heart?

No.

He considered that suffering all joy because of the surpassing knowledge of Christ Jesus.

I would not be surprised if he questioned his mission.

I think it would only be natural, and would be a time for introspection and

meditation.
But he never faltered.

We are going through a time of upheaval now.
We wonder what is going to happen?
What lies ahead for us?

At the same time we need to be pondering as well who are we in the midst of this.
What is God calling us to do in response?

Paul went through his upheaval and became one of the most influential people in the early church.
I went through my upheavals and now there is a huge difference between the atheist I was to the Christian I am now.
Paul continued to grow throughout his ministry and trials.
I have continued to grow throughout my ministry and my own ups and downs.

How about you?
How are you coping?
Where are you on your journey of faith?
Amen?

PRAYER PREPARATION:

We have come to the time where we come together in prayer.

Let us give thanks for the gift of this day
and pray for the life of the world.

If you have a prayer of joy or concern that you wish to lift to God, and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, we invite you to share.

As this song plays, in the silence of our hearts or type your request in the nearby chat.

Brandon Lake - Hard Fought Hallelujah (Music Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtJPdiYk15g>

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.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of Solidarity, Thank you for being a God who enters the suffering of the world—who doesn't run from those in pain but rushes to the site of blood and tears. Release us from those empty cravings for unity that come at no cost to the oppressor. Lead us toward spaces of costly advocacy. Amen

Arthur Riley, Cole. Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human (p. 142). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Amen

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Our worship is over
our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting.
Go in peace, come again in hope.
Amen.
Let's dance.

MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

Praise (feat. Brandon Lake, Chris Brown & Chandler Moore) | Elevation Worship
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2oxGYpuLkw>

Go in Peace!