

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 your 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.

Today friends is the Third week of Advent.

As we enter this season of advent we will light a candle every Sunday.
Advent is the season when we prepare and awaken to the signs of God's love and
justice unfolding in our midst.

We await the birth of the Christ-child and will light the candles of Hope, Peace,
Joy, and Love.

Would you pray with me?
Come Holy Spirit and fill this place with your presence.
We invite you on this day to prepare our hearts as we listen, ponder, mediate, and
receive the good news.

May your peace flow and be within us today.
Amen

Candle Lighting Ritual (Luke 3:7-17 - Advent week 3 - Joy)

When confusion claims us
When we feel unable to do anything right
The Holy invites us to be faithful
That we may find Joy

(Light candle of Joy)

As this song plays I invite you to reflect and share in the nearby chat, "Where in the world do you find joy these days?"

SCRIPTURES

Today's Scripture comes from the book of Luke 3:7-17 (The Message)

When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: "Brood of snakes!
What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river?"

Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God's judgment?
It's your life that must change, not your skin.

And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as 'father'.
Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there - children of Abraham are a dime a dozen.

God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life.
It is green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire."

The crowd asked him, "Then what are we supposed to do?"
"If you have two coats, give one away," he said.
"Do the same with your food."

Tax men also came to be baptized and said, "Teacher, what should we do?"
He told them, "No more extortion- collect only what is required by law."

Soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"
He told them, "No shakedowns, no blackmail-and be content with your rations."

The interest of the people by now was building.
They were all beginning to wonder, "Could this John be the Messiah?"

But John intervened: "I'm baptizing you here in the river.
The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out.

He is going to clean house-make a clean sweep of your lives.
He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll
put out with the trash to be burned."

The Word of God for the People of God
Thanks be to God

SERMON - Then what are we supposed to do?

Last week we talked about making way, cleaning out the clutter that gets in the way
to feel peace.

A peace that is given to us by the one who calls us to trust that all shall be well.

A peaceful state of mind that despite our circumstances gives us hope.

The peace of God that comes from above and takes on the different shapes and ways
to soothe your soul and ground you in God's love.

This week we lit the candle of joy.

I asked at the start of our service to share where you find joy in your world, in
your context.

And now I ask you, is joy the same thing as happiness?
What do you think?

According to the dictionary, joy is a feeling of great pleasure and happiness.

So is that a yes?
So what is happiness?

According to Britannica it describes happiness as a state of emotional well-being
that a person experiences either in a narrow sense, when good things happen, as a
positive evaluation of one's life and accomplishments overall- a sense of joy.

So is that a yes?
Is happiness and joy interchangeable?

We shall return to this.

The text today starts with some serious words from John to those coming to him.
It does not take a Pastor or person going to seminary to see that this might not be
the best welcoming speech.

John not only called them snakes but a brood of snakes!
The word "brood" (gennēmata) describes a group, perhaps telling them you are the
children from a group of people who think they can get away with things.

Brood of vipers! Group of people with bad intentions.
Brood of vipers are too many coming at you and can hurt you.
So he calls them out even saying "what do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river?"

The message is a different translation and I closed it for its simplicity today.
Baptism was popular.

John was the guru of the time.
So perhaps they were coming because that is where everyone was going and they were changing their lives for the better.

I have a confession that may surprise you: I'm a crime enthusiast. It's my guilty pleasure.

There was a time when I aspired to be a criminal psychologist and profiler!
However, my passion for art and creativity ultimately led me away from a career in law enforcement.

But I still listen to podcasts, read, and watch all kinds of criminal minds things.
In one of my many readings I came across the story of a guru from India.

He was very popular in India creating spaces where people from all over the world would go and try to meet him.
This guy realized that yoga, meditation, clean living, and retreat style worked so well with the people.

Another lady in America had this secret society in New York.
The secret part made it more appealing.
Same concept, meditation, clean living, retreats with work, and a higher standard of living to open the subconsciousness of those who wanted to be enlightened.

Charismatic individuals have an incredible ability to captivate a wide range of people, from lawyers and doctors to judges, teachers, and everyday individuals yearning for something more profound—a sense of fulfillment.

These seekers are on a quest for peace, joy, and happiness.
Often, they find themselves drawn in during their most challenging times, yet there are also those who, at the peak of their success, pause and wonder, "What comes next?"

What is the purpose of life?

Embracing a lifestyle centered on wellness can bring a sense of lightness, improved health, and enhanced focus.

Engaging in meditation and mindfulness practices allows you to slow down, enabling you to make thoughtful choices rather than hasty ones, leading to a feeling that everything is falling into place.

Additionally, participating in retreats and connecting with a like-minded community will help you forge meaningful relationships, ensuring you never feel isolated again.

The individual's hard work, effort, and dedication will ultimately be perceived as emanating from the Guru or the newly embraced religion or community.

In the same way Baptism serves as an initiation for those who choose to follow Christ and undergo this sacred rite.

John emphasized that this act should not be pursued for its popularity; rather, it requires a genuine transformation of one's life.

Theologian Karl Barth, said, "Baptism with the Spirit is concretely the divine cleansing and reorientation of men."

John is actively engaged in a process of cleansing while simultaneously urging the people to transform their ways.

In response, the crowd is questioning, what actions should we take?

John begins by saying, "If you have two coats, give one away," he said. "Do the same with your food."

To the Tax collectors, he basically tells them to stop cheating people and collect only what is required by law.

To the soldiers and I assumed they were Romans he tells them to stop mistreating people, shaking them down, blackmailing, and to be happy with what they have.

In other words John was saying stop being _____ (you can fill in the blanks). Stop extorting, cheating, hurting, taking, blackmailing, mistreating, and being horrible to people.

Think about the following example friends.

What you hold and what you have filled your cup with will determine what spills out.

Take a moment to reflect on this.

Imagine you are holding a glass filled with water.
If someone accidentally collides with you, what will spill?

It won't be juice or wine; it will be water.
So, consider what you are carrying in your cup today.
When life challenges you, when someone cuts you off in traffic, or when a person dismisses you with a roll of their eyes, what will overflow?

What will emerge when faced with name-calling or gossip?

John Baptized in water but he said the Holy Spirit is coming and you will be

Baptized in fire.

Fire that cleanses, that burns out impurities, and makes gold shine.
That is the fire that we pray that God pours on each one of us.

Remember your Baptism.

A symbol of dying to the world, and rising up to a new life in Christ.

But life happens and we fail, sin and run from grace.
Sin my friends is the separation of God's favor, or presence.

What is separating you from feeling God's presence in your life?
Name it. (In your mind, no need to share)
Call it and bring it to God today to be released.

The Holy Spirit poured over you is the one who brings in joy.

A joy that is unspeakable.

Barbara Holmes says, " Joy Unspeakable erupts when you least expect it, when the burden is greatest, when the hope is gone after bullets fly.
It rises on the crest of impossibility, it sways to the rhythm of steadfast hearts, and celebrates what we cannot see."

Joy does not depend on your state of mind because even when you're sad and depressed it lies by you.

Joy will remind you of things to be thankful, grateful and filled with hope.

Joy is different from happiness even if it is described in the dictionary as the same.

One is a state of being and the other one is a state of becoming.

Joy is within you laying there despite and in spite of circumstances.
Happiness is an emotional state depending on a circumstance.

John had the chance to become a very popular leader, a Guru like the people I have talked about.

The crowds around John were wondering if he was the messiah?

He could have said yes.

Just like the people I spoke about.

You know the gurus who had a following looking for peace and clean living, who turned out to be cult leaders.

We must measure the actions of a John, or a charismatic leader with the fact that we are called to "DO NO HARM."

We are called to love our neighbor as ourselves.

John reminds us that if we simply do what is right, share, do not cheat, be content with what you have, you will be living a life that welcomes the Holy Spirit and its

blessings.

Joy my friends is not something that someone can give you but rather something that is already yours.

Joy resides deep within us, often overshadowed by the clutter that needs to be cleared or reorganized in our hearts.

No matter your situation, remember the words of John, who spoke of one coming after him, someone so great that he felt unworthy to untie his sandals.

This is the one we celebrate during Advent, born of Mary, a child who became a tangible presence in our lives and continues to dwell in our hearts.

So, what actions should we take? Strive to do what is right, embrace your calling, and extend love to yourself and your neighbor.

May you be filled with an indescribable joy.

May it be so.

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.

Kirk Franklin - Wanna be Happy?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ci-0k9GojM4&list=RDCi-0k9GojM4&start_radio=1

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

As the days grow shorter and the dark of the night stretches, may we remember that

Christ was formed in the holy darkness of a womb- that our origin is not the garden but the dark.

May this be a season of deeper encounter with the night.

May the darkness guide us into deep rest, resisting exhaustion and overexposure.

May it be the darkness that opens us to the unknown, that we would make peace with uncertainty and marvel at mystery.

And may it be a darkness that forms us into people capable of holding the lament of others.

Let us remember what glory grow in the dark Amen.

-Black Liturgies by Cole Arthur Riley

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

Darren Criss - Christmas Dance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJSSH6HtHMo>

Go in Peace!