

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 Fourth 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 1:46-55) - Advent week 4 - Love

When we feel invisible, ineffective,
Too small to make a difference
The Holy invites us to be God-Bearers
And we shall find Love

(Light candle of Love)

Where in the world do we find Love these days?

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

GATHERING MUSIC

Chris Tomlin - Noel (Live) ft. Lauren Daigle
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Vwu-t7QRaE>

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

SCRIPTURES

Today's reading comes from the book of Susanna 31:28-26 (Anglicized version)

The next day, when the people gathered at the house of her husband Joakim, the two elders came, full of their wicked plot to have Susanna put to death. In the presence of the people they said, 'Send for Susanna daughter of Hilkiah, the wife of Joakim.'

So they sent for her.

And she came with her parents, her children, and all her relatives.

Now Susanna was a woman of great refinement and beautiful in appearance.

As she was veiled, the scoundrels ordered her to be unveiled, so that they might feast their eyes on her beauty.

Those who were with her and all who saw her were weeping.

Then the two elders stood up before the people and laid their hands on her head.

Through her tears she looked up towards Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord.

The elders said, 'While we were walking in the garden alone, this woman came in with two maids, shut the garden doors, and dismissed the maids.

Then a young man, who was hiding there, came to her and lay with her.

We were in a corner of the garden, and when we saw this wickedness we ran to them. Although we saw them embracing, we could not hold the man, because he was stronger than we are, and he opened the doors and got away.

We did, however, seize this woman and asked who the young man was, but she would not tell us.

These things we testify.'

Because they were elders of the people and judges, the assembly believed them and condemned her to death.

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, 'O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; you know that these men have given false evidence against me.

And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!'

The Lord heard her cry. Just as she was being led off to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice, 'I want no part in shedding this woman's blood!'

The Word of God for the People of God

Thanks be to God

SERMON

Who will stand for the truth?

The story of Susanna is woven into the broader Greek tradition of Daniel. Brite Divinity professor Dr. Gafney notes in her Woman's Lectionary A, that this passage originates from the earliest Bible found in the Septuagint, LXX, and has influenced numerous texts, including the eight-book canon recognized by the Episcopal Church, which is embraced by Anglican, Orthodox, and Catholic Christians alike.

This reading is not in our regular 66 book Bible, and It is not a common Biblical Text.

that we are normally used to.

However, this reading is dramatic and suspenseful.

As an individual from a Mexican family, this story reads like a modern novela!

(Novel)

Let me introduce to you the characters of the story.

1. Joakim is the rich husband of Sussana.

2. Sussana is his wife. She is so beautiful that the scriptures said she had to be veiled and not show her body.

3. Then there are two unnamed powerful men who are appointed judges.

4. Then you have the background unnamed people, the servants.

The setting of the story is at Joakim's place, in particular a private gated garden.

The story opens with people sad and a trial.

The brief excerpt we explored raises numerous intriguing questions.

Did Sussana find herself in a compromising situation with another man?

Who could he be—perhaps one of her household staff?
Given their discovery in the garden, could he have been the gardener?

And was she punished for her alleged infidelity?
The elements of suspense and drama are ripe for a captivating love story.

Imagine what if Sussana was married to a wealthy man who was often absent, leading her to fall for someone else, with plans to escape together before they were caught.

While that scenario might be a stretch, the testimonies from the elders certainly leave room for speculation.

This is the truth about our sanctified imagination.
When we lack sufficient information to support our biases, our thoughts begin to create narratives to fill the gaps.
The scriptures we engage with today do not provide the complete picture.

At first glance, today's readings may not seem to revolve around love, yet it is deeply rooted in that very theme.
Today, we lit the candle of Love.
Google suggests that around 100 million love songs have been created, highlighting the significance of this emotion.

Love transcends boundaries, embodying a shared human experience filled with inexplicable feelings that defy scientific explanation.
It carries an air of mystery, and regardless of what direction it takes, it goes towards someone who can relate.

Let me give you some examples of types of love.
Agape - A Greek word for a love that is selfless, unconditional and sacrificial.

There is Eros - This in Greek is known as the “physical love” or “sexual desire” and involves passion, lust, and romance.

Platonic love - This is a common Greek work to indicate friendship.

There are more that I could describe but let's stick with these for today's narrative.

The scriptures for today omit the story's background, requiring a full chapter read for clarity.
To summarize briefly, two elders, appointed as judges, operate from the residence of Joakim, the wealthy husband of Susanna.

The scriptures says, “These men were frequently at Joakim's house, and all who had a case to be tried came to them there.”

This narrative echoes countless tales from history.
Men often point fingers at women for alleged misconduct, while women are pressured to cover themselves to avoid inciting temptation.

Beyond the dramatizations of shows like Law and Order SVU, many women face blame for various forms of assault—be it physical, verbal, mental, or sexual.

Sussana frequently visited the garden, relishing the freedom to roam without the fear of being observed.

The garden was enclosed by gates, which her servants would secure, allowing her to wander or enjoy a refreshing bath in privacy.

The judges in this story share their accounts of events they assert to have seen, but they neglect to disclose the full extent of their participation and the true context of what transpired. They omit the fact that they themselves harbored desires for Susanna.

The scriptures says, in Sussana 31:8-14

“Every day the two elders used to see her, going in and walking about, and they began to lust for her.

They suppressed their consciences and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering their duty to administer justice.

Both were overwhelmed with passion for her, but they did not tell each other of their distress, for they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire to seduce her. Day after day they watched eagerly to see her.

One day they said to each other, ‘Let us go home, for it is time for lunch.’

So they both left and parted from each other. But turning back, they met again; and when each pressed the other for the reason, they confessed their lust. Then together they arranged for a time when they could find her alone.”

Each of them had a plan.

What kind of love is this?

Was it Eros, Agape, Platonic?

So here is a story of sin developing in the mind, in the heart and then in action.

Sin is the separation of the individual from God.

Sussana, is married.

They are at her husband's house.

They are each in their own minds and hearts planning, thinking, working overtime on how to bring this sin to reality.

They are overwhelmed, it says.

Have we ever been overwhelmed by something we know is NOT a good idea?

Such things are normal human experiences.

For example I am a diabetic.

But I love Pepsi!

Sometimes I want a Pepsi so bad that I go and get one next door and drink it right away so my partner don't catch me!

But who am I really cheating on?

My body will remind me why this is a terrible idea!

The two judges, and men of this story have a obsession that has turned toxic, blurring the lines between seeing her as a person with autonomy and viewing her merely as a problem to be solved.

The scriptures suggest that they did offer her a choice.
Let's explore whether the church truly believes that a genuine choice was presented to her.

Here's what happened.

These two individuals were determined to outwit one another, so one day they both claimed they were heading home for lunch.

Instead of actually going home, they secretly hid in the garden to catch a glimpse of her.

On that particular day, Sussana chose to take a bath.

Can you believe it?

OMG!

Can you see how this tale is developing?

Sussana, what were you thinking?!

It seems like you were deliberately luring these unfortunate men!

Does that really sound like a valid reason?

And so, Sussana, unaware of the lurking men concealed in the garden, strips off her clothes and leaps into the water.

Now the moment the servant leaves, Sussana relaxes in the water.

I'm thinking she is probably just enjoying the sun rays, the quietness, the stillness and the divine light from above.

When her whole life changes, because these two come out of hiding and plead with her to let them join in.

What?!

Okay maybe that did not happen.

But what did happen is that they both gave her a choice.

Be with us, or as the scripture says, "lie with us" or else.

Read between the lines church, maybe they said something different.

But let me ask you something: Does it sound like a choice when they say add the "or else?"

Was this truly a choice presented to a woman?

In today's society, it's common to hear about victims of domestic violence and how it often takes multiple attempts for them to leave an abusive relationship.

Yet, some people place the blame on women, insisting they have the option to simply

walk away.
But do they really?

Consider Sussana—if she were to leave her husband, where would she go? Was that truly a choice? Did these men provide her with support or a sense of safety?

Because the offer was not even one that made sense.
It was let me take advantage of you or I will say someone else came in here and you will be killed for committing adultery.

What a choice!

That is how the enemy works.
The adversary, representing the flawed aspects of humanity that pursue desires without considering their impact on others, operates in a deeply self-centered manner.

The opposite of any type of love.

In the realm of criminal psychology, I've frequently encountered the concept of perpetrators dehumanizing their victims, which allows them to evade accountability for their actions.
This behavior is also evident in the dynamics of racism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, and the list can go on.

These judges even go as far to say, “we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away.”

And who will believe a woman?
I wonder if all of the characters at this moment realize this.
Who will believe a woman?

Now I can't help but wonder if they attempted to harm her by force and this is why she started yelling, calling for the people to come up and save her.

Because she tells them that her love for God, her commitment to that love for God will not change or make her do something against them or her will.

The scriptures says, that Susanna groaned and said, “I am completely trapped. “For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord.” (Sussana 31:21-27)

Instead of complying she starts to scream at the top of her lungs, prompting her servants to rush in, but not before the two inside dash to the gate and start fabricating stories about what they just saw.

Let me pose a question to you, congregation: could any of those judges have glanced at one another and thought, "This has gone too far"?

They had the opportunity to confront each other about the deception, yet they opted to cover for one another instead.

What kind of love was this?

Was it love?

Yes. The love of self-preservation.

In our lives, we are granted the freedom to choose our paths.

Each decision we make comes with the responsibility of facing the consequences, especially when our love for the one who guides us is genuine and selfless.

When we opt to deceive, manipulate, or justify our actions, we engage in a superficial relationship with God.

It's like saying, "You're my friend, but I must admit this friendship isn't my priority," which may unintentionally undermine the principle of loving others as ourselves.

But the truth is, I must look for numero uno, me.

The scriptures says that "when the people in the house heard the shouting in the garden, they rushed in at the side door to see what had happened to her. And when the elders told their story, the servants felt very much ashamed, for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna."

Did the servants stand up for Susanna?

Did they say, nothing like this has ever happened before, and we did not see anyone else come into the garden.

But it says they were very much ashamed.

Ashamed at who or what?

Church, the love for the one who calls us into existence and into covenant with us demands the loyalty, respect and commitment to do what is right even when nobody's watching.

That is such a loaded word, "no one is watching."

There are three of them watching.

One of them if you can hear that still voice of the Holy Spirit is telling you to love yourself by living life with integrity.

If you have experienced any form of violence, embrace the love that God has for you and understand that you are not at fault.

We are here to assist you in discovering resources that can lead you to a more complete life.

Wholeness can take many shapes, and together we can explore what that means for you.

This year at SL, I will be offering Pastoral hours, so let's arrange a time to talk.

While I am not a therapist, I can accompany you on your journey and help you find the support you need to feel whole again, whether that involves therapy, AA, or another path that resonates with you, but you are NOT alone.

BUT love yourself!

Because The Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit loves you!
And if you find yourself as a witness to a situation that can harm others may you have the courage to speak up.

And if you find yourself tempted by the sin that is like a magnet pulling you towards a demise, may you find something to hold on and remove yourself from the situation. Don't give in!

And if you find yourself as Susanna wondering if I should just sin, give in cause what is the alternative?
May you live up to your convictions wholeheartedly despite and in spite of what's coming.

How does the story of Susanna end?
Susanna pleaded with God and found favor.
You see that as she was being led away someone spoke up.
You will have to go explore the rest of the story after that.

Friends, may you find your voice.
Stand for the truth, stand for integrity, compassion and love.
And if you have the ability to speak for those who have no voice, may you have the courage to do so.

Remember despite the plans that others might think for you, God's plans are greater.
For they are for you to have a life and one that is abundant.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Immanuel refers to Jesus Christ.(Matthew 1:22-23)
It interprets this as a prophecy of the birth of the Messiah.
Immanuel in Hebrew means God is with us.
God is with you, you are not alone.

Friends, remember that you are love beyond your wildest dreams, no strings attached by the one above.
Believe it is 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.

Chris Tomlin - O Come, O Come Emmanuel (Lyric Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9HcsERoxm8>

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

O come and be the hope in all our lives, through chaos and confusion still survive.
O Holy-One-we know the path of hate all too well.
We pray that we believe deep inside and remember Emmanuel, Immanuel, God is with us.
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

Crowder - The Elf Song
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-r01hVc8RVE>

Go in Peace!