

WELCOME

Grace and Peace be with you in the name of our Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.

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 second Sunday after Christmas.
It is also the first Sunday of the month and we will be partaking in Holy Communion.

I invite you to gather the elements for after the Message of Hope to share together
in Holy Communion.

Gather something to eat, such as bread, a cracker, or a cookie.
As well as a cup of grape juice or wine to drink as well together when the time
comes to pray over the elements and remember our savior Jesus Christ with the ritual
of Holy Communion.

Would you pray with me?
Come Holy Spirit and fill this place with your presence.
May your light shine through our hearts and keep us warm during this season.
I pray for those here today and those who could not join us.
May you blessings be upon your church and your people
In Jesus name I pray,

Amen.

If you have any announcements in the life of the church please feel free to share with us as our gathering music plays.

I will like to share with you that I will be helping lead our social media accounts.

I'm looking forward to sharing with the world our services, nuggets of wisdom from our morning meditations, and Psalters.
If you have a social media account and would like to connect with us please look for us online under the hastag - @firstUCCsecondlife
<https://www.facebook.com/firstUCCsecondlife/>

You can also find me on all social media under the handle: @cre8tivepastor

We are hoping this year friends to take our digital nugget of hope, a safe and brave space out there for others to see.

GATHERING MUSIC

for KING + COUNTRY & Michael W. Smith | Place In This World (Recorded Live In Nashville)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAMqH2czUk8a>

SCRIPTURES

Today's reading comes from the book of John 1:1-9 (NRSV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

The word of God for the People of God,

Thanks be to God

SERMON - Not Alone

Today is the first of the month, the first Sunday of a new year.

Some may even consider it the beginning of a new era, filled with uncertainties and daunting possibilities.

While reflecting on the text and praying about this week's message, one figure stood out to me, the life and writings of Jürgen Moltmann.

Jürgen Moltmann was a prominent German theologian renowned for his role as a professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen in Germany. He gained recognition for influential works like "Theology of Hope," "The Crucified God," and "God in Creation," which have been translated into numerous languages, enriching theological discourse worldwide. Moltmann passed away on June 3, 2023, at the remarkable age of 98.

Jürgen Moltmann's journey through despair and faith is profound. At just 16, he was drafted into the German army during World War II. His turning point came during a devastating Royal Air Force raid that claimed 40,000 lives, including that of a close friend.

Overwhelmed by what he saw, he surrendered to the first British soldier he encountered.

From 1945 to 1948, he endured the hardships of being a prisoner of war, shifting between various camps.

To the Germans, he was a deserter, while his captors viewed him as a soldier of the Nazi regime.

During this period, Jürgen Moltmann delved into his understanding of God. A British chaplain would read the Psalms, share the gospels, and visit the prisoners of war.

Moltmann's theology (or the study of religion and understanding of God) was shaped not by the isolation, suffering, and despair surrounding him, but by the nature of God, which revealed to him hope, joy, passion, and the richness of life amidst the turmoil.

In today's reading we read that from the beginning the Word was with God and the Word was God.

This concept has likely been the subject of numerous sermons. God took on human form through Christ, experiencing life among us, enduring suffering, dying, and ultimately rising again. The Apostle John draws a powerful link between Jesus as the light of the world, a light that darkness cannot extinguish.

When we encounter this message, we instinctively nod in agreement, resonating with the truth of John 8:12, where Jesus proclaims, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Jürgen Moltmann, despite experiencing profound darkness, found relevance in these words, asserting that even in Sheol, God was present with him. He referenced a Psalm that emphasizes God's omnipresence, affirming that He can be found in both the heavens and the depths of hell. This belief that God accompanies us everywhere is truly powerful.

Think about it for a minute and let's listen to this Psalm and then make it our own.

If I ascend to heavens, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, (the nether world, the place of the dead), behold, You are there. Psalms 139:8
In moments of joy and success, God's presence is felt.

If I'm deep in my depression and sadness has overwhelmed me and I can't see the light, You are there.

The assurance that, no matter the circumstances, a higher power is always present brings comfort without question. Understanding that one is never truly alone is the first step toward rediscovering that glimmer of hope.

The Apostle John was about imagery and light and darkness are clear as day and night. Because even if they had no electricity back then (so I assume Ben was not around yet) they knew about candles and fire.

They knew how to shine a light into a dark place, a dwelling, a house, a place to be.

In 1943 Jürgen Moltmann had a profound guilt on how he had escaped death by the Nazis regime for refusing to kill more Jewish people. He had this profound guilt of being alive and he called it "tormenting memories" that were overwhelming.

He often asked what was the point of it all.

Yes, the light is here and I'm warmed and not alone but what is the point when the world around me is dying?! He kept asking, what is the point of it all?

How frequently have you found yourself pondering this question?

As you observe the wave of anti-trans legislation being proposed for the upcoming year, do you ever reflect on how we thought we had overcome these challenges since the Stonewall era? Currently, Texas is facing 32 anti-trans bills, and I am left questioning how I can maintain my youth camp and LGBTQ+ organization while ensuring the safety of both the young participants and my volunteers.

Yet, I firmly believe that darkness cannot extinguish the light.

And so for me the point of it all is life.

I can not let the shadows overtake the light and life.

What are the challenges in your own home, your own life, your own place that leaves you trembling asking, what is the point?

What is going on that makes my candle flicker like it is going to go out.

But when this happens think about the candlelight service you might have attended in real life, or seen on a video somewhere.

Each light is passed down to one another and if it goes out, reach over and let us light it again.

That is community, and the body of Christ feeling, knowing, and asserting the need around us.

Despair is not an option, reach out, we are here.

Such feeling was how Jürgen Moltmann resonated with the anguish of the Jewish people, echoing the words of Jesus on the cross: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

This sentiment raises a profound question for many of us: don't we also find ourselves crying out in despair, wondering, "Where are you, God?"

Yet it is in the prison camps that he met grace through the people around him. Jürgen Moltmann recounted his experiences in prison, where he and fellow inmates were tasked with rebuilding towns ravaged by the Nazis. It was during this challenging period that he encountered acts of kindness from Scots and others, which he described as his first glimpse of God amidst the darkness.

Despite grappling with profound shame, he felt the warmth of forgiveness and compassion from those around him. Many of us can relate to being our own harshest critics, a sentiment that resonates deeply with me. I often set impossibly high standards for myself, to the point where even God seems to urge me to ease up.

We all have moments where we believe our actions might push the Divine away, yet it is in those very moments that we often find grace drawing closer. This grace is not meant to foster self-loathing but rather to remind us of our inherent worth.

The light mentioned in John symbolizes the illumination of our darkest feelings of self-loathing. Grace is not meant to diminish our worth or subject us to harsh judgment. I remember feeling this way in my youth when the Pastor would remind us that "Jesus died for your sins," only to hear the disapproval when we stumbled again. It felt as if every misstep was a betrayal of that sacrifice, leaving me paralyzed by the fear of offending Jesus.

However, the love and grace from God manifest as a gentle light, gradually revealing the path ahead. If you've ever experienced such feelings, allow that light to envelop you, for you are truly worthy of a fulfilling life. While we may not deserve grace, the question remains: who truly does?

And yet, and yet...it is ours no questions asked, that is why it is called grace.

And if all things came through Christ as John says then why does evil exist?

Why are people in what my seven year old says, a bunch of meanies?

We may not have the power to dictate others' actions, but we can certainly choose our reactions.

Embracing the belief that everything flows through Christ reinforces the truth of the living God's presence in our lives. John reminds us that everything that exists through Him embodies life, which serves as a guiding light for humanity.

While we cannot alter the circumstances unfolding around us—be it in politics,

economics, legislation, or the judicial system—our focus can remain on our personal responses.

For we can mentally and spiritually prepare to trust in God and the light that will not be overcome by darkness.

Jürgen Moltmann, says, “Humanity is likely to die of apathy of soul like this before its founder in social or military catastrophes.

We need nothing so much as the mission of life so that we can again affirm and love life so much that we protest against death and all the powers that disseminate death.”

The mission of life by the one who gave us a new way of living is dignity, respect, love, healing, hope, joy, and peace in the midst of chaos.

It is like a child trusting in their parents amidst a storm.

I grew up on the border of Brownsville and Matamoros, where hurricane seasons were a part of life.

As a child, I didn't grasp the true danger of hurricanes; all I knew was that my sturdy brick house felt safe and welcoming for my primos (cousins), tias (aunts), tios (uncles) and familia (family) to come over.

I looked forward to hurricane season, anticipating my aunt's homemade tortillas, refreshing aguas frescas, (non-alcoholic beverage made by blending fruits, flowers, cereals, or seeds with water and sugar) and lively games of Mexican Loteria.

We would play by candlelight, enjoy cold treats, and cherish our time together, often for days on end.

My parents and aunts turned what could have been a frightening experience into a joyful occasion, and I felt secure in their care and the protective environment they created.

I feel the spirit telling me to trust in my Divine parent and not fear what I can not see.

Even in what Jürgen Moltmann describes as the darkness of the soul, God's presence remains.

For friends, this is where hope resides, illuminating our way forward with an unwavering light.

Even in moments of feeling lost, fearful, or anxious, I must hold onto the belief that God is supporting me, refusing to let the darkness consume me. Peace, dear friends, is the profound realization that God is with us. Romans 5:1-5 reassures us that it is God's love poured into our hearts that provides this certainty. Moltmann also emphasizes that joy is fundamental to the essence of human existence.

He says, “Life in joy is already an anticipation of eternal life In joy over the hoped-for future, we live here and now, completely and wholly, weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice Life in hope is not half a life under a proviso; it is a whole life awakening in the daybreak colors of eternal life.”

Joy - When we truly believe that God affirms our lives then we are born into the belief of infinite love. That despite our hurts, our sorrows, or disappointments, deep inside when the hurricane passes, joy will rise again.

When we embrace the belief that God affirms our existence, we awaken to a profound

sense of infinite love.

Even amidst our pain, sorrow, and disappointments, joy will inevitably resurface once the storm has passed.

As we radiate this light into the world, we must remember that it cannot be extinguished by darkness.

It is essential to protect this light, resisting the urge to respond with aggression or violence.

Instead, we should strive to live abundantly, in harmony with ourselves and others, which sometimes requires stepping away from distressing situations.

As we enter this new year, let us remember that the Holy Spirit is here to guide us toward wholeness, healing, and restoration.

I believe the Holy Spirit embodies life itself, encouraging us to be visible, authentic, and filled with divine energy.

Experiencing God in our lives is as natural as breathing, and we should feel free to express our feelings to the Holy-One without fear of offense.

Church, may prayer, laughter, dance, joy, and peace accompany us as we embody the light of the world, which dwells within us through the Holy Spirit.

And let us continue to share this light and dance joyfully, regardless of our surroundings, for the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

May it be so,

Amen

SHARING GOD'S TABLE

We invite you today to gather a piece of bread a cup of juice or wine and join us for Holy Communion.

And so we remember that on the night Jesus was betrayed he shared a meal with his friends, his followers the people he called family.

At a simple table Jesus gathered with friends, he remembered the liberating story of the Passover,

shared the bread, passed the cup, and asked us to do the same, and remember – remember God's liberating work in the world – work embodied in Jesus.

We remember how the greatest gift he gave to us was very life.

On this month this table is live reminder that all are welcome here.

This table is open to all who seek nourishment for the soul.

Join together in this holy communion

not because you must, but because you may

not because you are full

but because in your emptiness you are in need of God's mercy and assurance

come just as you are

It is the Lord's table

And it is spread for you.

I invite you to hold your hands over the elements as we pray:
God of liberation, with this bread we remember.

Let us pray
Come Holy Spirit upon these gifts of grape and grain.
Make them before us the life and love of Jesus, that we may
become the life and love of Jesus, for the world.

In Real Life, in Second Life,
We are connected to each other
Through our faith in you,
In and through this community,
we may find that your love
Is as real and tangible
As this bread and cup
We share.
Amen.

Now take the bread.
Feel it in your hand.
And let us remember another time, and another table,
when Jesus gathered in a upper room with his disciples,
his closest friends.
When he took the bread on the table for the evening meal, blessed it, broke it, and
shared it saying "This is my body, given for you. Take. Eat. And remember me."

Let us eat this bread of life together.

Now pick up your cup of drink,
Because at the end of the meal, Jesus took a cup of wine, the juice of the vine,
And said, "This is the cup of the new covenant, a new relationship in my blood.
Drink, and as often as you drink, remember me."

Let us drink this cup of blessing together.

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 - COUNTRY PSALM (Music Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7t85F64XEfE>

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.

God of renewal,

We hold space for the sorrows and joys of another year.

We have grieved. We have laughed. We have given too much and too little.

As the year ends, and another one begins...ground us in the tension of remembrance and dreaming that this season holds.

Help us honor our becoming without demanding our past.

Remind us that every season has its place, and that the path of liberation is never linear.

Amen

(In part of the Black Liturgies writings 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

The Black Eyed Peas - Where Is The Love? (Official Music Video)

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

Go in peace.