

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](http://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 remembrance of the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ and  
remembering our own Baptism.  
I will invite you to participate in a liturgy tonight after the message of Hope.

If there are any announcements that you would like to share about the life our our  
church please share as the gathering music plays.

I would like to invite you if you would like to have a pastoral meeting with me to  
send me a note card or a message and we can find a time.  
Over the next few weeks I would like to open a space for being available to our  
members for a conversation or if anyone would like to seek a time for spiritual  
direction on Second Life.

Will you pray with me before our gathering song?

Come Holy Spirit and fill this place and the homes of your people with your presence.

May your spirit keep leading us, filling our hearts with joy, peace, and love for one another and ourselves.

As we remember your Baptism and our own today, may we cherish the bond we share with you and your beloved community.

I pray this in Jesus name,  
Amen.

#### GATHERING MUSIC

Matt Redman - 10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtwIT8JjddM&list=RDUFIyEFmIXvA&index=46>

#### SCRIPTURES

Today's reading comes from the book of Luke 3:15-17 and 21-22 (NRSV)

As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, [John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with [b] the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The word of God for the People of God,

Thanks be to God

#### SERMON

Baptism Sunday and Our Baptism

Today as I mentioned at the beginning is the first week of Epiphany.

This translates as "appearance" or "showing forth".

Epiphany means a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something.

In the church it's the season of the manifestation of the humanity of Jesus, the birth and Baptism.

This past Monday was Día de los Reyes, or Three Kings day.

In some countries including my ancestral one in Mexico, three kings celebrate the day when the Magi came from the east and followed a star leading them to the Christ child.

For kids it means opening three gifts and having a day of celebration with a rosca, a bread that is made just for that occasion.

We are now delving deeper into the topic of Baptism.

Initially, we discussed John's stern invitation to the Baptism, where he referred to some as vipers and urged them to demonstrate true repentance through their actions, not just their words.

Today, we reflect on Jesus' Baptism as described in the book of Luke.

This marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry and highlights the role of John the Baptist, as many people questioned whether he was the awaited Messiah.

I am curious friends, how many of you have been Baptized and when was it?

I want to invite you to reflect on this as after this I would like to invite you to a liturgy as we remember our Baptism together.

Now back to my sharing I mentioned I was Baptised many times.

Last year I believe I shared that I was one of the most Baptized avatars here.

Bear with me as I tell my story again for those who had not heard about my many Baptisms.

See, I was baptized as a baby at Cristo Rey Catholic Church in Brownsville, Texas.

While I don't remember the ceremony, I've heard stories of me in a lovely white outfit, with my parents, Irene and Tomas Martinez, filled with joy.

The event was significant enough to be featured in the Brownsville Herald, our local newspaper, and my family celebrated with a vibrant fiesta, fully embracing our Catholic customs.

I believe there were Mariachis and a lavish feast to mark the special day.

At twelve years old, I was baptized again.

My mother had left the Catholic Church to join a conservative evangelical Pentecostal group.

This change allowed me to actively embrace my faith and connect with my church community.

I learned that my infant baptism was considered invalid because I hadn't made that decision on my own.

In my late twenties, I underwent baptism for a second time, this time at what I believe was a Baptist church in Dallas, Texas.

This church held conservative values, and they believed I was genuinely becoming part of a community of believers rather than being associated with a less prominent

congregation on the border of Mexico.

Upon joining the UCC, I inquired whether I needed to be baptized again.

The answer was no. I

The United Church of Christ, baptism signifies entry into the universal church, connecting us with countless Christians globally.

I learned that the UCC honors baptisms performed during childhood or in other Christian denominations.

What a relief—I was on the verge of my fourth baptism!

Has anyone been Baptized more than once like I was? I'm just curious.

My Catholic parents believed I would burn in hell or be in limbo if as a baby the Priest did not sprinkle me with Holy water.

My evangelical church believed I would burn in hell if I did not accept Jesus as my savior, confess publicly my sins, and was born again with the submersion of my body in the water.

I mean all the way in!

In my twenties I was told that I had to really decide if I could be a productive member of a church and that my salvation had to be followed by my Baptism, the symbol of renewal and obedience.

The obedience to be cleanse, and to be forgiven as I gave a public declaration that I was going to be a productive member of the church by agreeing to commit to certain church activities.

As I reflect on the various interpretations surrounding my Baptisms, I find myself questioning why the sinless Son of God chose to undergo Baptism.

Could it be that this act was Jesus' means of demonstrating his humanity and humility? Perhaps it served as a symbolic anointing as he embarked on his new ministry, akin to how kings were anointed with oil, but in his case, he entered the water instead.

What do you think?

Jesus was born from and into a world of systematic sin. Baptism was the signal of the renewal.

The passage about the "threshing floor" and gathering wheat into the granary while burning the chaff with unquenchable fire intrigued me.

Is Jesus implying that some people are destined for hell?

Is He indicating a separation, deeming certain individuals unworthy and discarding them?

Could it be that those who reject Jesus find themselves cast aside?

According to a reading from Rev. Carol Lakey Hess, on Feasting on the Word it said, "By Jesus accepting John's baptism he refuted John's dualism between the wheat and

the chaff (v17). Because through his ministry Jesus showed no distinction with who we sat with and broke, they were all sinners and deeply flawed people.”

And as his ministry is about to start he makes the distinction that he will like all those around him enter the water in obedience of renewal.

I can almost see Jesus in my mind standing with the crowd awaiting to be Baptized.

Hearing John scolding the Pharisees and the Sadducees, emphasizing that their lineage from Moses does not exempt them from the need to repent for their wrongdoings, which may include deceit and unkindness.

This situation reminds me of how churches often reflect the cliquish dynamics seen in high school, with groups forming around shared interests like music or sports. Joining the Universal Church or being baptized should not be viewed as an exclusive membership but rather as a shared commitment to love our neighbors as ourselves. It calls for a departure from old habits of revenge and self-interest, urging us to embrace a more compassionate and inclusive way of living.

When the phrase "you are my son in whom I am well pleased" resonates, the Trinity unites in a profound moment. The Creator's voice is heard, the Son stands in the water, and the Holy Spirit descends.

John paved the way for the Son of God to begin His ministry, embodying humility and a steadfast commitment to speaking truth to authority.

Each of us who have been Baptized might have a different story of how it happened. Some might have been sprinkled, some might have been dunked, while others might have been pour water over their heads.  
Or like me, all of the above!

But regardless of how it occurred three things were present.

One - Water

Two - The community around you in most cases your family, and the church you were in.

Three - The words of institution from a Priest, a Pastor, a Minister “I baptized you in the name of the creator, in the name of Jesus Christ our Redeemer and in the name of the Holy Spirit.”

For those who are new would you believe that such Baptism can happen here on Second life?

Well it has.

On January 7, 2018, Johnni (one of our members) was Baptized here on this sanctuary by our Founder and Pastor Jerry.

Many are taken back by this and would say, how on earth?

In Norway our beloved Jonni placed his hands in the water, surrounded by the support of our church community in Second Life.

Together, we embraced him as our brother, a member of our congregation and cherished community.

And our beloved Pastor Jerry (may he rest in peace) shared the words of the institution upon him.

First UCC in Second Life is a real church with a real community providing a space for all to be welcomed, affirmed, loved, and given the sacraments of our beloved church from Baptism to Holy Communion.

Each of us are real people behind an avatar.

Pastor Jamie, Chris and I are real pastors ordained in the United Church of Christ in a conference that is recognized as a real church.

Beyond that we are real because who we represent here on Second Life is our digital appearance embodying our actual person.

Jonni, you and I can hear the words from above saying "You, are my son, my daughter, you are my child. You are beloved. I am very well pleased with you..."

Embrace this truth, church. No matter your sexual orientation—be it Transgender, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pan sexual, asexual, or beyond—you are cherished. Despite what the world may say, you are loved and validated.

My sister the Rev. Rhina Ramos and I had the honor of baptizing our sister Adora in a swimming pool during a conference in San Francisco. Adora chose baptism to affirm her new identity and name and wanted to be Baptized for the first time into the family of Christ.

While my brother Illan, who frequently visits us here on SL, had been baptized by his family in his church. He cherishes that moment but sought affirmation of his new name and identity. So, at the last General Synod, we celebrated an affirmation of baptism for Illan.

Please know we are willing to do all of this here friends.

Church, I believe in Christ not for the promise of heaven or rewards after death, but because I aspire to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who reached out to those often marginalized and overlooked.

Jesus identity to be with the least of these not seeking the glory beyond that to God.

So I believe that we are called into ministry in our own ways using our gifts to empower and support each other through Baptism.

Baptism is a tangible form of entering, becoming and being.

Not with water alone but with community, with words of institution, with life. After his Baptism Jesus begins the walk of his ministry.

Jesus' Baptism does not separate him from others but rather sets him in the middle

of all the people willing to belong.  
That was talking the talk and walking the walk.

Reflect on your Baptism today, not merely as an event or a membership, but as a cherished badge of honor that signifies your inclusion in the beloved family of God. The journey as a child of God can be challenging, yet embracing self-love and extending that love to others, just as God loves us, makes the effort worthwhile each day.

And so my fellow friends I'm going to invite you to stand up with us.  
Come join me, really.  
Let's form a circle or semicircle if possible around this Baptism thing.

And I invite you to read with us in your home this liturgy as Doug helps me read the congregations part.  
And let us remember our Baptism together with our beloved siblings.

#### AFFIRMATION OF BAPTISM

One: Dear friends, on this day of re-creation we recall Christ's baptism, and we claim and remember our own.

People: We gather at this font of living water to celebrate the gift of God's redeeming grace.

One: For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

People: For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, male or female—and were all made to drink of one Spirit.

One: Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.  
Amen

You may return to your seats.

#### 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.

Jordan Feliz - Beloved (Official Lyric Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgJFUW3VenY&list=RDUFIyEFmIXvA&index=25>

#### 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.

Today as we bring our prayers I want to lift those in Altadena Community Church, United Church of Christ family in California that has lost their church in the fire.

As well as others such as our Methodist siblings that lost their church.

The church's pastor, the Rev. Paul Tellström, said that the loss would not impede the church's progress and that the most important takeaway was that the church is not the building. The church's Facebook page shared images of the building engulfed in flames and parishioners singing outdoors.

We stand in prayers with Rev. Paul and all those affected in California by the fires.  
There is a card in the red binder of ways to help those affected by the fires.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER -

God who knows sorrow, we have nowhere to hide from this void.  
Thank you for being a God who is moved to tears by death.  
For in doing so, you remind us that one can know healing is imminent and still make space to grieve what is.  
We're reminded that hope and grief are not mutually exclusive.  
Help us hold the departed in our minds, in our bones; help us hear their laugh echo, their voice hum across our skin.

May our mourning look how it must from one moment to the next, free from guilt about how much sadness we can muster.  
And as we meet grief in all its complexity, grant us a small company capable of remaining with us in our loss, those who journey with us as we heal.  
(Black Liturgies - Cole 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.

MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

Zauntee - Jesus Called My Name (Official Music Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9Va70aCnD4>