

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 Second Life is  
a church with full real life standing in the  
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 we enter Palm Sunday and we prepare for Holy Week ahead.  
We hope you can join us next Sunday for Easter as all three of us Pastors will be  
here.

I'm always excited to worship together as a team.  
Now let us start our service with a reading of a call to worship.

Pastor Yadi: Lent began in the wilderness; it concludes in Jerusalem.

Doug/All: We now come near to the end of one story. Another will soon begin.

Pastor Yadi: We have followed Jesus this far; today we remember how he faced  
betrayal, falseness, rejection, and torment.

Doug/All: And we witness, once more, that he taught and walked in love through every step of the journey.  
(We share the palms with you)

Jesus Enters Jerusalem and the Temple

Pastor Yadi - As they approached Jerusalem, entering Beth-Phage at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent off two disciples with the instructions,

Doug - "Go into the village straight ahead of you, and immediately you will find a tethered donkey with her colt standing beside her. Untie them and lead them back to me. If anyone questions you, say, 'The Rabbi needs them.' Then they will let them go at once."

Pastor Yadi - So the disciples went off and did what Jesus had ordered. They brought the donkey and her colt, and after they laid their cloaks on the animals, Jesus mounted and rode toward the city.

The Procession of Palms (attach your palms)

Doug - Great crowds of people spread their cloaks on the road, while some began to cut branches from the trees and lay them along the path.  
The crowds—those who went in front of Jesus and those who followed—were all shouting

Yadi/All - Crowd (Children) "Hosanna to the Heir to the House of David!  
Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Most High! Hosanna in the highest!"  
Amen

GATHERING MUSIC

Hosanna - Hillsong lyrics  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoM0AT8fBvs>

SCRIPTURES

Today's scriptures comes from the Gospel of John 12:1-8 (The message)

Six days before the Passover, Jesus enters Bethany where Lazarus, so recently raised from the dead, was living.

Lazarus and his sister invited Jesus to dinner at their home.

Martha served.

Mary came in with a jar of very expensive aromatic oils, anoints and massages Jesus feet and then wiped them with her hair. The fragrance of the oils filled the house.

Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples even then getting ready to betray him said,  
"Why wasn't this oils sold and the money given to the poor?  
It would have easily brought three hundred silver pieces."

He said this not because he cares two cents about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of their common funds, but also embezzled them.

Jesus said, "Let her alone. She's anticipating and honoring the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you. You don't always have me."

Word got out among the Jews that Jesus was back in town. The people came to take a look, not only at Jesus but also at Lazarus who had been raised from the dead.

So the High Priest plotted to kill Lazarus, because so many of the Jews were going over and believing in Jesus on account of him.

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

SERMON - Character

Today I wanted to spend time in the story before the entrance into Jerusalem which we read together at the start of our service.

Before the triumphant entry in the book of John, we encounter a captivating story filled with intriguing characters.

Among them is Lazarus, who was miraculously brought back to life, a tale recounted in the preceding chapters.

So I invite you to enter this story with the lens of those characters and their motives.

As we begin to explore the scriptures we just read, we find ourselves at a meal, likely prepared by the grateful sisters in honor of Jesus for raising their brother from the dead.

This gathering may have also coincided with Jesus's trip to Jerusalem for the Sabbath, making it a fitting occasion for celebration.

The scene unfolds with everyone seated at the table, including Lazarus, who, now alive, has become somewhat of a celebrity, drawing the curiosity of those around him.

Martha is the one who takes on the role of serving everyone. She is the one who serves.

While it's possible that she had assistance from others in the kitchen or those bringing items to her, she remains the primary figure in the act of serving.

This is the same Martha from Luke 10:38-42, who became frustrated when she was busy serving Jesus while her sister Mary did not lend a hand.

Does that story ring a bell?

See back in that story she was running around serving Jesus and Mary was sitting there just listening to him talk, mesmerized.

Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the best part."

Well, here we are again Martha is serving and Mary, "quien sabe?" (Who knows?)

Perhaps Mary was out getting the oil.

I can only imagine when Martha sees Mary coming in with the pound of perfume, "You got to be kidding me?!"

Or maybe she was proud of her and knew ahead of time what was about to happen.

Either way here comes Mary with a pound of very expensive oil to anoint Jesus.

This anointing friends is associated with Jesus death in all four Gospels. (Mark 14:3-9, Matt 26:1-15, Luke 7:36-49)

I want to highlight three significant aspects of Mary's actions in this scene.

First, the aroma—she pours is a pound of fragrant oil, enveloping the entire house in its delightful scent.

Next, the act of touch is crucial; she wipes and massages Jesus' feet.

The Greek word *ekmasso* (ἐκμάσσω) is a verb that is noteworthy because it parallels the action Jesus took when he washed his disciples' feet, as described in John 13:1-17.

Although this event occurs later, it's essential to recognize the same expression of love in her gesture.

By anointing his feet, she demonstrates love through her actions.

Finally, Mary concludes this intimate ritual by drying his feet with her hair, a gesture that embodies both humility and affection.

In 1 Corinthians 11:15, hair is referred to as a woman's glory, symbolizing not just beauty but also her devotion and attention to Jesus.

Then there is the character of Judas.

I've often wondered if Jesus was aware that this man was a thief.

Did Jesus really NOT KNOW that Judas was misappropriating their funds?

Embezzlement perhaps is the word to describe what he was doing.

See embezzlement after all, is a type of fraud where someone in a position of trust, like a treasurer, misuses the money they are supposed to manage for personal gain.

It's important to note that embezzlement differs from simple theft.

The embezzler has legitimate access to the funds and is entrusted with

responsibilities such as making payments and managing accounts, while a thief merely takes what doesn't belong to them.

Bet you didn't know we are reading in the scriptures perhaps the first white collar crime occurring.

The character of Judas presents several points worth considering.

The scriptures label him a thief, someone who takes without consent.

He managed the finances but misappropriated funds for his own gain.

As he plotted to betray Jesus, he skillfully masked his true intentions by faking concern for the poor.

Often, those who make the loudest claims are the ones diverting attention from their

own actions.

It's essential to focus on the trickery at play rather than being misled by surface appearances.

The scriptures say he did not care about the poor because his character was not one to give two cents about them.

What is your character?

What is my character?

What is character?

Character refers especially to moral qualities, ethical standards, principles, and behavior.

This is what you do when no one is watching.

In church terms this is your testimony.

Judas did not have a good testimony.

That is what leads me to wonder why Jesus, aware of Judas true intentions, chose not to intervene.

He could have staged an intervention!

Why didn't He reveal Judas for who he really was, effectively removing him from their circle?

It raises so many questions.

Why share a meal with someone who was about to betray you Jesus?

Was there a divine plan at play?

Was Judas merely a pawn in a larger scheme orchestrated by God?

It's reminiscent of the story of Job, where God allowed Satan to test him.

If that's the case, it feels profoundly unjust.

These questions have troubled me deeply, prompting me to seek answers through prayer.

Theologian Karl Barth, concluded his five-hundred page discussion on the doctrine of election talking about Judas.

He says, "Judas the betrayer, the one who rejects Jesus, although he may not have known it is still an elected and called apostle of Jesus Christ."

It struck me one day that we possess free will, and Judas had countless chances to transform during his time with Jesus.

Judas witnessed miracles firsthand and spent moments both in the presence of crowds and in private conversations, all of which could have inspired a change in him.

Let me share a story about someone whose integrity often goes unchallenged, yet who acted unjustly towards those they were meant to support.

I once worked alongside a clergy member for many years.

We both shared a Latin heritage and had put in considerable effort to achieve our status as licensed pastors.

Eventually, I departed from my former church while she continued her work with the Latin congregation.  
However, she was later dismissed without any legal repercussions for embezzlement. It left me pondering what truly transpired, especially since our small congregation hardly generated any funds, if any at all.  
Did she take the bread?

And I'll be the first to admit I love the chisme.(Gossip)  
I often joke with a fellow colleague that I'm not being chismoso (gossiper)  
I'm just wanting to know everything so I can pray deeply about what is going on.

Anyways, here is the tea.

This individual was clearly regarded as a trusted pastor, often meeting with those in need.

She initiated a "prayer group" where each participant contributed money, and after two weeks, one member would receive the pooled funds as a "donation."

This arrangement was perceived as a way to help and support one another. For those familiar with poverty, the allure of a financial opportunity is hard to resist.

However, this "prayer group" operated privately, with attendance limited to a select few and strictly by invitation.

The church remained unaware of this initiative, and the church treasurer never received any of the collected funds.

There were clear warning signs: first, the event was conducted in secrecy; second, only a select group of individuals received invitations; and third, the funds were directed to the pastor rather than the church itself.

The showdown came when a person who had been "donating" never won or got the money. The rest is history.

When it comes to finances, we must be cautious not to fall into temptation or be swayed by others.

My father taught me about being careful with other people's money when he worked at a supermarket as a store manager.

He once told me that people often perceive poverty as a reason to suspect theft, emphasizing the importance of going the extra mile to avoid any blame if something goes missing.

He frequently discussed Murphy's Law, reminding me that if something can go wrong, it likely will, so vigilance as he said was the key.

Consequently, he would only deposit money after meticulously counting it alongside another manager.

This lesson has stayed with me throughout my life.

As a youth pastor, when people offered to support the youth, I would suggest they place their contributions in an envelope labeled "Youth Budget" and drop it in the

offering plate.

Similarly, when we received checks, I advised writing the church's name and specifying "Youth Funds" in the memo.

Be alert friends in all you do so that your testimony, your integrity is not found in question.

Jesus said "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." (Matthew 10:16)

What does your testimony say?

Judas was preparing to betray him and he lived his life walking along the messiah hearing him but never really listening.

He saw the miracles but he never experienced the miracle within.

Each of us must make choices that reflect whether we honor God's will or merely our own desires.

It's important to clarify that this doesn't mean we should belittle ourselves; we are cherished children of the Most High.

Instead, we should reflect on whether our actions might harm others and if we are acting out of a desire to benefit from their suffering or taking at their expense. The enemy of our lives, a dark presence that seeks to rob us of our joy and hope, wields the weapons of guilt, shame, anger, and self-hatred.

In contrast, Jesus came to offer us life in abundance.

Jesus defended Mary in scripture for her act of preparing his body for burial.

This narrative is followed by the way he triumphantly enters Jerusalem, palms are laid at his feet, marking a pivotal moment in the unfolding narrative.

Every story has its structure, with an introduction, a middle, and a conclusion; this one is approaching its climax, moving toward the Sabbath, the triumphant entry, the crucifixion, and ultimately, death.

We witness the preparation of the body, the exaltation of his ministry, the betrayal, the crucifixion, the stillness of Saturday in the tomb, and the glorious resurrection on Sunday.

This narrative starkly contrasts the one who takes away and the one who gives abundantly, as Jesus extends grace to both the faithful and the unfaithful.

In a world often fraught with tension, we learn to walk unafraid of evil. Saturday may bring darkness, but resurrection is imminent.

Throughout Lent, we have reflected, challenged ourselves, and reinforced our commitment to a life characterized by love, joy, and hope.

May we be inspired to serve, love one another, and share in the death of Jesus and

his resurrection.

Take comfort in knowing that the good news resonates not only on Palm Sunday or Easter but remains with us always.

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.

Ben Fuller - If I Got Jesus (Visualizer)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gc2sNY5HMOV8>

#### 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 -

##### Confession:

Lord Jesus Christ, how well you know our hearts, and still you love us— you have loved us to the end. We have denied you, and we have denied our calling to serve one another. We have betrayed you, and we have betrayed your commandment to love one another.

Pour out your Spirit of grace upon us. Teach us to love and serve you faithfully and to love and serve one another by the example you have set for us; in your holy name we pray.

#### DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Now the Lord Jesus Christ has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. Now the promise is fulfilled, and love's redeeming work is done:



In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.  
Thanks be to God!

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.

I can't wait to see you all next Sunday as we celebrate the good news of resurrection.

Now lets dance!

#### MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

123 Victory Kirk Franklin  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlAfM6k0yIg>