

WELCOME

Thank you for coming!

We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us today.

This is a sacred time, as we gather in community to open our hearts to God.

I invite you to light a candle,
wherever you are

As our candles are lit here in our sanctuary,
to remind us of God's presence with us,
and to set aside this as a time of worship for you.

Our service will be in voice and text.

Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have media turned on. .

There will be a link in Nearby Chat if you want to view the video in your own browser.

I'm going to start our Gathering Music and run the rest of the announcements underneath.

GATHERING MUSIC

"I'll Find You" Lecrae

https://youtu.be/Jv8IqJm6q7w?si=oVHfBMWXEp_61x2I

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).

And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

As we like to say, it's good to be real in Second Life!

And as a 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."

We celebrate God's Love everyday.

and seek to be a place of belonging for those who need it, where all people will be included, accepted and supported in their journey of faith and their struggles in life.

If you would like a bulletin for today's service you can find it in the red binder in the back.

If you would like to make a donation to support this ministry

there is a donation bowl in the back,

or you can go to our website

firstuccsl.org

We thank you for the blessing of your presence and your support.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

We have two stories from scripture from the lectionary for our readings today.

The first, from the Hebrew Bible, is the story of the prophet Elijah and his encounter with God on Mount Horeb.

The second, from the gospel of Gospel of Luke, tells the story of Jesus' healing of the Gerasene demoniac, a man beset by many demons.

It is worth noting that Gerasene, where the gospel story takes place, is Gentile territory.

Let us listen to the Spirit speaking through the words of 1 Kings, chapter 19, verses 1 through 15 and the Gospel according to Luke chapter 8 verses 26-29.

1 KINGS 19:1-15 (NRSVUE)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done
and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword.

Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying,

“So may the gods do to me and more also,

if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.”

Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life and came to Beer-sheba, which
belongs to Judah;

he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness

and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree.

He asked that he might die,

“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my
ancestors.”

Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him,

“Get up and eat.”

He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water.

He ate and drank and lay down again.

The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said,

“Get up and eat, or the journey will be too much for you.”

He got up and ate and drank;

then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the
mount of God.

At that place he came to a cave and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying,

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts,
for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed
your prophets with the sword.

I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

[The Lord] said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is
about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting

mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord,

but the Lord was not in the wind,

and after the wind an earthquake,

but the Lord was not in the earthquake,

and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire,

and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at
the entrance of the cave.

Then there came a voice to him that said,

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts,

for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed
your prophets with the sword.

I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

Then the Lord said to him,

“Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall

anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

LUKE 8:26-39 (NRSVUE)

Then they arrived at the region of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.
As he stepped out on shore, a man from the city who had demons met him.
For a long time he had not worn any clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.
When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him, shouting,
“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?
I beg you, do not torment me,”
for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man.
(For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles,
but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.
Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?”
He said, “Legion,” for many demons had entered him.
They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.
Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding,
and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these.
So he gave them permission.
Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine,
and the herd stampeded down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.
When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.
Then people came out to see what had happened,
and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus,
clothed and in his right mind.
And they became frightened.
Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed.
Then the whole throng of people of the surrounding region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them,
for they were seized with great fear.
So he got into the boat and returned.
The man from whom the demons had gone out begged that he might be with him,
but Jesus sent him away, saying,
“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”
So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

The Word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

“ Love Comes Close”

Let us pray ...
I'd like to start by inviting you to take a deep breath,
inhaling the peace of Christ, always available to us.
And slowly exhaling whatever worries or stress we may have brought with us today.

Let's do that again.

Deep breath, inhaling peace,

low, slow exhale, letting go, at least for a moment, of what we are carrying.

Now just take a moment and notice. How do you feel?

God, it is said, is as close as your next breath.

It's a powerful reminder that we have a God who is always present with us; a God who, when we are in need, comes close and doesn't abandon us when the going gets tough.

A God who is Love and Life.

The scripture stories we heard today give us two examples of that.

They tell of a Love that comes close to provide the comfort and healing needed in hard times.

They show us a God who loves us into life.

Even for those most favored of God, like Elijah, life is hard.

And time and again we find ourselves in the wilderness.

We lose our job - the biopsy comes back and it's cancer - divorce papers are filed -

all the funeral guests are gone -

we have fought the good fight, caused good trouble for so long, given it all we had, we are burned out, our bucket is empty -

depression and anxiety wrap us in the darkness of a desert night.

The wilderness we think is our refuge comes in many shapes and sizes.

Sometimes, like Elijah, we run there ourselves - thinking to escape but end up getting lost.

Sometimes we are thrown there by circumstances out of our control.

Sometimes, like the Gerasene man who named himself "Legion," our own inner demons drive us there.

And then there we are in the wilderness.

Feeling isolated, exhausted, without the physical or emotional strength to go on.

Yet that wilderness isn't so isolated or empty after all.

Elijah finds out that God is in the wilderness too,

and angels, divine messengers.

An angel came close, touched Elijah - letting him know he was not alone.

The angel told Elijah, "Get up and eat," and there was bread to eat and water to drink.

Elijah who had been so confident and commanding as he faced off 450 rivals of Baal, now let an angel feed him.

He had nothing left.

At first it wasn't enough sustenance for him, and he lay back down under the tree.

But God didn't leave him alone.

The angel returned, touched him again, pushed him to eat more bread,

"otherwise," the angel said, "the journey will be too much for you."

That time the food sustained him for a little longer. Long enough to get to the sacred mountain, Horeb.

But no farther.

Once again, Elijah was lost. Huddled deep in a mountain cave, in the dark.

But again, God didn't leave him alone -

even when something in Elijah clung to his grievance, his despair.

God came close to him, a gentle whisper in the silence,

perhaps the sound of Elijah's own labored breath,

or a sound heard not so much with the ears as with the heart.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Then Elijah could sense God's presence with him in the darkness, in the cave, in the wilderness of his own heart.

And when Elijah finally recognized God's presence, he was comforted; healed and brought back to himself.

He had the strength to come down off the mountain and continue the journey of his life and the work God had set before him. Then there's Legion, the Gerasene man beset by his own inner demons.

The text doesn't specify what those inner demons were, but we can guess.

Most of us have our own, those voices that tell us that we are unworthy, that remind us of all our mistakes,

that criticize whatever we do.

The inner voices of shame that push us to hide out, even from those who love us, even from God.

Legion was living in his own wilderness, away from the community, and he had his own cave, the tombs of the dead.

He had lost himself and much of his humanity, cast aside with his clothing.

We don't have to understand the nature of his demons to see his suffering.

But Jesus came close to this man, when others in his own community likely did not, stepping out of the boat to meet him. Jesus looked on him with compassion, treated him like a human being, instead of a chained animal,

asked him his name, stayed even though the man's inner demons resisted what Jesus offered,

challenging Jesus, "What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth,"

and ultimately Jesus healed him.

Jesus showed, in the words of Father Kevin O'Brien, that "Love comes close and does not run away."

I've spent time in the wilderness, in dark caves, more than once in my life, perhaps you have too.

Maybe you're there right now, or someone you love is.

Times when we feel like a failure, despite our real successes.

Times when we feel lost and empty. Times when nothing seems to matter and we give up.

Times when we feel alone.

Times when we wonder, "where is God?"

Right there. It is right there, that God meets us, loves us.

Right there in our wilderness, right there in our darkness.

God is right there, hurting with us, crying with us, feeding us a little bread, some living water,

gently whispering to us in the depths of our hearts:

"I am here. You are not alone."

Turning the darkness of the tomb, to the darkness of the womb, or the nurturing soil that will allow new life to sprout and grow.

But it is also important to notice that these stories do not end when the comfort or the healing,

with these men returned to themselves.

The next step, and the true mark of healing, is the return to community to give to others what they have been given.

Legion, now "clothed and in his right mind," wanted to stay sitting at the feet of

Jesus.

Perhaps Elijah would have preferred to live peacefully up on that sacred mountain. But that's not how it works.

Elijah was called to continue his work as a prophet, anointing God's chosen kings and speaking out.

The man who was Legion was told to go declare how much God had done for him, thus becoming the first missionary to the Gentiles, at least according to Luke. Having experienced God's healing love, we are called out into the world to embody that love for others.

We do the work God sets before us:

we share the story of God's love to give hope for others;

we speak out in the name of love, not division or hatred;

we provide bread or water for a hungry, thirsty world.

We do whatever work is ours to do in the times in which we live.

I met a woman once who spoke to me powerfully

about how she was deeply aware of the presence of God as she struggled with cancer.

Through all the pain, and the effects of the chemo treatments,

she sensed that God never left her alone.

She eventually regained enough strength to return to her job as a nurse.

She knew that God had blessed her in her time of need and she used that knowledge to help others.

In the terms of these scripture stories,

God led her out of her wilderness to help others in their own wilderness -

as only someone who has experienced the wilderness can. She couldn't cure their cancer, or their addiction, or fix their

broken relationships.

But she could provide spiritual food and be present with them in their darkness with a gentle word of hope based on her own experience.

She could come close and stay close when the going got tough.

Angels provided for her and now it was her turn to be an angel for others.

God at work in our world.

Sometimes we are Elijah, sometimes we are the angels.

Sometimes we are Legion, sometimes we are the hands of Christ.

After all, in the words of 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body but yours,

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,

Yours are the eyes with which he looks

Compassion on this world,

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,

Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world."

And yet, we aren't alone in that work either.

It isn't all up to us.

We don't have to get through the wilderness alone, God is there.

We don't have to feed or heal the world by ourselves, God is there.

We don't have to be strong all the time.

Sometimes we feed others, sometimes we are fed.

Sometimes all we have to do, all we can do, is get up and eat,

let God come close, reach out our hand, put one foot in front of the other.

Hang on until morning.

God is with us in it all.

The bread and the water will come.
God will sustain, and we will eat and drink and live anew.
Then it will be our turn to sustain others.
To become the love we have been shown.
In a moment, I'm going to invite you again to take a deep breath.
Breathe in the peace of Christ, always available to us.
Let it nurture you body and soul.
This time, as you exhale it slowly, imagine yourself exhaling peace out into the world.
The Lord knows that the world needs it.
So now, with me, take a deep breath, inhaling peace,
then slowly exhale peace into the world.
Give back the peace you have been given.
One more time. Breathe in peace, breath out peace.
God is as close as your next breath.
And God is love.
Love that comes close and does not run away.
Amen.

"Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness"
<https://youtu.be/ijThMo90Lhg?si=0w9t-kwTx8bayAgx>

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Worship is a time when we,
as a community,
join our hearts together,
to connect to God and to each other.
So this time is the essence of what we do here together.
If you have a prayer that you wish to lift to God,
and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, type it in Nearby Chat at this time.
As people share their prayers in text
please read them prayerfully
and hold this space as sacred and safe
to open our hearts to God.
Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Lord hear our prayers.
Those voiced here today.
Those spoken only in the depths of our hearts.
Those for which we have no words.
We lift them all to you, O Lord,
with faith in your boundless love and grace.
And we pray all this in the name of the one
who taught us to pray together, saying:
"Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kin-dom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Given us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for Thine is the kin-dom, and the power,
and the glory forever.
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.

“Will You Come and Follow Me”

<https://youtu.be/S-Bq1YtpQL8?si=KuC7LqdjK3m-IkBN>

GO IN PEACE!