

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).

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.

Our service will be in voice and text.
A copy of our services today, our bulletin or worship guide can be found inside that
red book located in the back.
The 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.

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 donation bowl located in the back next
to the red book or 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.

I am so glad to be back among you my siblings.

I am grateful for Doug helping to cover for me while I was out of a work trip down
in South Texas.

Today friends is not the first Sunday of the month however last week we did not
celebrate or partake in Holy Communion so we will be doing this today.

I invite you to gather the elements for after the Message of Hope to share together
in our sacred time of remembering Christ in the breaking of bread.

Gather something to eat, such as bread, a cracker, or a cookie.

As well as a cup of grape juice or wine to drink after we pray over the elements remembering our savior Jesus Christ with the ritual of Holy Communion.

Will you pray with me as we begin our service together?

INVOCATION:

Come Holy Spirit and fill this place and the digital realms that connect us to many with your presence.

We thank you for this place and for those here today.

Amen

If there are any announcements about the life of the church, please type them in Nearby Chat during our Gathering Music.

GATHERING MUSIC

R.E.M.

It's the end of the world

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

SCRIPTURES

Today's reading comes from the book of Luke 21:21-19 (The Message)

One day people were standing around talking about the Temple, remarking how beautiful it was, the splendor of its stonework and memorial gifts. Jesus said, "All this you're admiring so much—the time is coming when every stone in that building will end up in a heap of rubble."

They asked him, "Teacher, when is this going to happen?

What clue will we get that it's about to take place?"

He said, "Watch out for the doomsday deceivers.

Many leaders are going to show up with forged identities claiming, 'I'm the One,' or, 'The end is near.' Don't fall for any of that.

When you hear of wars and uprisings, keep your head and don't panic. This is routine history and no sign of the end."

He went on, "Nation will fight nation and ruler fight ruler, over and over. Huge earthquakes will occur in various places. There will be famines. You'll think at times that the very sky is falling.

"But before any of this happens, they'll arrest you, hunt you down, and drag you to court and jail.

It will go from bad to worse, dog-eat-dog, everyone at your throat because you carry

my name.

You'll end up on the witness stand, called to testify.
Make up your mind right now not to worry about it.

I'll give you the words and wisdom that will reduce all your accusers to stammers and stutters.

You'll even be turned in by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. Some of you will be killed.

There's no telling who will hate you because of me.

Even so, every detail of your body and soul—even the hairs of your head!—is in my care; nothing of you will be lost.

Staying with it—that's what is required. Stay with it to the end. You won't be sorry; you'll be saved.

The Word of God for the People of God,

Thanks be to God

SERMON - Full Disclosure -

The chapter of Luke we will explore today follows the miraculous acts of Christ, including the healing of a paralyzed man among others and transitions into themes of the temple's destruction and doomsday talk.

My goal is for us to think through the text together and reflect on the following statement, Christ never promised an easy walk so why do it?

I often recount my upbringing in a strictly evangelical and conservative setting, where adherence to a rigid lifestyle was paramount.

My diet was meticulously controlled, and there were stringent rules regarding clothing—pants, shorts, or anything deemed revealing were prohibited, even during swimming.

This strictness extended to various aspects of life, largely guided by the teachings of the Hebrew Bible, which served as a foundation for those who might question the authority of our Elders.

Additionally, interactions with outsiders were limited; the only permissible engagement was to share the "good news" and encourage them to embrace Christ.

It took a while to get these thoughts and way of living shaken off.
It took my mind to progress into a life giving way.

Today, I find it mind boggling that church elders and preachers, both past and present, believe that a doomsday mentality filled with messages of hell, pain, and suffering will effectively draw people in, especially teenagers.

Another strategy they employ as a form of "good news" is the promise of Jesus' return, which seems to be aimed at instilling hope amidst the fear.

Never fear Jesus is near!

I still have Spiritual Post Traumatic Anxiety when seeing at bookstores the "Left behind series."

If you don't know about these multi-million dollar movements I will share with you the gist of it.

The Left behind series was written in my very own back yard of Dallas, Texas.

The series was written in 1995-2007 by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B Jenkins.

I was out the door from the church when they started to play in my youth group.

The left behind series focuses on the end times and the aftermath of the Rapture, where true believers are taken to heaven, leaving non-believers to face a chaotic world dominated by the Antichrist.

The series is often played by a known actor from Growing Pains Kirk Cameron.

Before the advent of these film series, the message conveyed in the Book of Revelation was straightforward and dark.

It emphasized that Jesus would return, and those found engaging in wrongdoing would face really bad consequences, symbolized by the mark of the beast and other ominous signs.

In the 90s, following a fervent youth revival centered on the Apocalypse and the return of Jesus, I encountered my first traumatic experience.

I entered the kitchen to see my mother's chanclas (sandals) by the stove, water boiling.

Panic surged through me as I ran around the house, shouting for my mom, my sister Cristy, my brother Tommy, and even the dogs, only to discover they were all next door.

Overwhelmed with fear, I cried uncontrollably, convinced that Jesus had abandoned me until they returned and saw me having a full blown panic attack.

Fear often serves as a powerful tool for maintaining control, keeping individuals compliant and preventing progress.

You bet I walked the carefully crafted church line after this incident.

Fear is an emotion that has historically been exploited to create divisions among

people, as seen in various instances throughout history.

Adolf Hitler capitalized on the fear of the Jewish population, using it to justify his aggressive expansionism driven by nationalism and perceived threats from other nations and ethnic groups.

Similarly, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the surge of anti-Muslim sentiment following the September 11 attacks illustrate how fear can lead to violence and discrimination.

Today, the fear surrounding immigration continues to shape societal attitudes and policies, demonstrating the enduring impact of fear on human behavior and social dynamics.

This interpretation of Luke serves as a cautionary note for those who assert they know the exact timing of events or who manipulate fear to coerce others into specific beliefs or actions.

"One day people were standing around the Temple, remarking how beautiful it was, the splendor of its stonework and memorial gifts.

Jesus said, "All this you're admiring so much-the time is coming when every stone in that building will end up in a heap of rubble."

They asked him, "Teacher, when is this going to happen? What clue will we get that it's about to take place?"

He said, "Watch out for the doomsday deceivers.

Many leaders are going to show up with forged identities claiming, 'I'm the One,' or, 'The end is near.' Don't fall for any of that.

When you hear of wars and uprisings, keep your head and don't panic. This is routine history and no sign of the end."

Too late!

I think our elders and religious leaders skip that part of the reading.

Doomsday preppers can be quite unsettling.

These individuals, often referred to simply as "preppers," dedicate themselves to preparing for catastrophic events, ranging from natural disasters to societal breakdowns.

They stockpile essential supplies and hone survival skills to ensure their readiness.

Those with financial resources may invest in elaborate setups, such as bunkers, underground facilities, or even private islands equipped with power, internet, and other luxuries.

Additionally, there are those who, like individuals I encountered in my youth, focus on mental and spiritual preparation for an impending apocalypse.

Throughout the world, there have been notable instances of groups eagerly anticipating the return of Jesus, often leading them to sell their possessions and gather in communal settings.

For example, in 1988 and again in 2011, Harold Camping directed followers to specific locations to await Christ's return not only in the United States but also in Vietnam.

Additionally, the events surrounding David Koresh in 1993 and the widespread anxiety over the Y2K phenomenon, which many believed would signal the end of the world, further illustrate this fervent expectation.

Cult leaders thrive in the need to have security, family, stability and support. That is how they get those who are alone, or have a significant loss in their lives to take the bait. Then slowly they are lured in by an illusion.

But how do we differentiate between an illusion and a reality?

Well, is what we are doing lead to a positive outcome in our lives or in the lives of others?

And what is the fascination for these end of the world events and genre?

Christ said, "Nation will fight nation and ruler will fight ruler, over and over.

Huge earthquakes will occur in various places.

There will be famines. You'll think at times that the very sky is falling.

But before this happens, they'll arrest you, hunt you down, and drag you to court and jail.

It will go from bad to worse, dog-eat-dog, everyone at your throat because you carry my name."

I feel a sense of discomfort when I see Christians, particularly those with a small 'c', on national television or hear preachers promoting a divisive "us versus them" mentality.

It often seems as though only a select few, typically those who adhere to a specific set of rules dictated by a charismatic leader, are deemed worthy of entering the kingdom of God.

Deep down, do we aspire to be the heroes, the ones who stand alongside God?

Do they even while having an exclusionary mindset undermine the very essence of faith and community.

There is a common perception that the LGBTQ+ community is at odds with the church due to perceived immoral behavior.

However, standing before you is a queer pastor who firmly believes this notion is unfounded.

A specific verse in Luke 21 stood out to me: it mentions being betrayed by parents, siblings, relatives, and friends. This made me reflect on the young individuals who faced rejection when they embraced their true selves.

And how we become the family of choice to many.

Friends, I believe that the church represents the embodiment of Christ's love and service, extending far beyond rules and the confines of a physical building.

Chris foresaw the collapse of the temple, signaling the end of an era of reverence to a building.

This raises the question: could it be that true church, community, and sacredness exist beyond the confines of a physical building?

Absolutely!

We saw this during the Covid era as churches around the world learned to connect online.

But for us we knew this was true.

Since 2013 First UCC in Second Life has been welcoming people of all kinds of walks, faiths, and journey.

This place was created and designed by our late founder, Rev. Jerry, may he rest in peace.

Today we are here continuing to share the message of hope across many digital realms beyond any boundaries.

Look around you—your home which is connected to our sanctuary.

Your place is filled with your beloved pets, your family, your comfort zone, as you engage in worship.

Through the power of Wi-Fi, satellites, YouTube, and various platforms, the Holy Spirit connects us all, spreading the Good News far and wide.

Not the good news of fear vs reward.

But the good news that I often repeat that nothing you can do, will do or have done can change God's love for you.

In both the time of Jesus and today, the world remains fiercely competitive.

While we may follow the teachings of Christ, we also possess the wisdom to navigate this reality effectively.

Jesus said, I'm sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves; be wary and wise

as serpents and be INNOCENT AS DOVES but WISE as SERPENTS.

Look it up, true story, it is located in Matthew 10:16.

Serving the one who calls you does not require you to abandon your knowledge, emotions, or critical thinking.

In fact, every part of you is embraced here.

Following Christ presents its challenges;
you may encounter individuals who insist that the end is imminent and that your beliefs will lead to persecution.

However, remain steadfast, endure the race and life is a marathon not a sprint.

What is your position as a disciple?

For Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it was the belief that all humanity is sacred, regardless of their Jewish identity, which compelled him to oppose the Nazi regime as a pastor.

As followers of Christ, we must also stand firmly against antisemitism, hatred towards the LGBTQ community, and immigration policies that undermine human dignity and due process.

In our daily lives, we should reject harmful words and actions that diminish the ability of others to live fully, simply based on their love, beliefs, or faith.

What is your stance?

What will you refuse to accept in your presence?

What is it that you say, nope.....not on my watch.

Jesus says, "Make up your mind right now not to worry about it. I'll give you the words and wisdom that will reduce all your accusers to stammers and stutters."

It's not just a simple "don't worry, be happy" message; it's a reminder that you have support and backup, with someone by your side at all times.

He continues..."There is no telling who will hate you because of me. Even so, every detail of your body and soul- even the hairs of your head! is in my care, nothing of you will be lost.

Staying with it-that is what is required.

Stay with it to the end.

You won't be sorry, you'll be saved"

While I acknowledge that we have not overlooked the news and the warnings, nor the signs that are evident, I am aware that many of my friends and family are relocating

from Texas for safety reasons.

Some acquaintances in other regions are even choosing to move abroad.

My own family plans to leave by the end of the year and I ask for your prayers as I discern the timing and next steps.

Amidst these preparations for safety, we remain anchored in the truth of Christ's promise to be with us.

I have resolved to follow Jesus and embrace His teachings, which emphasize loving my neighbor, assisting those in need, and practicing kindness.

I will interpret his words as both cunning like a serpent and wise, gentle, and beautiful like a dove.

The concepts of hope, faith, and a fulfilling life can be intricate in our individual circumstances, so it is essential to cling to them as best as you can.

Engage in activities such as gardening, drawing, singing, and dancing, while placing your trust in the one who has called you.

The enemy, the diablo (devil) for some, bad energy, forces of evil, unkind things came to stress you into submission, cause you to fail and roll up like a ball and stay in bed.

You're not a problem when you do that.
And sometimes yes we need to do that.
But we can't stay there.

We seek assistance, support, resources, and community, whether in the physical world or within Second Life.

I am just a notecard away; let us stroll along the beach, visit my Connect space, or enjoy a dance while we converse.

Do not remain isolated and fearful. The Holy One has come to grant you life in abundance, enabling you to overcome challenges.

It is essential to seek divine assistance by expressing your doubts, asking God to "help my unbelief."

When you engage in your passions and talents, you become a source of strength against negativity and destruction.

Your kindness shines through your smile and positive energy, illuminating the world around you.

Following Christ is undeniably challenging, a truth echoed in Luke's teachings that remain relevant today.

However, unlike in the past, we now have the advantage of connecting through Second Life, and social media, transcending borders and geographical limitations.

Brian Erickson from the book Finding Wholeness, captures this sentiment well, emphasizing that faith in Christ is not a delicate world view that shies away from life's harsh realities to maintain an unrealistic optimism.

Instead, it embodies the path of the cross, where God's promise is not to shield us from life's trials but to accompany us through them.

Life unfolds rapidly, often filled with joy, so it's essential to stay true to your core values.

What are those values?
Can you list them?

Life unfolds quickly, especially within the church community, where joy and connection abound.

Church, embrace your true self, your love, and your existence, and strive to live life to the fullest.

It's important to recognize that true peace and wholeness can be found even amidst the chaos that life presents; however, cultivating a belief that everything will turn out well requires practice.

May your dedication and faith reveal the presence of the one who calls you, guiding you through your journey.

You're not alone, reach out, send a notecard, a pigeon, a flare, but remember never alone.

May you remember that when the shadows come near, and let us shine light on each other for each other and the world.

Let it be so.

SHARING GOD'S TABLE

We have now come to the time to share in Holy Communion together and I invite you gather your elements.
Place them before you and let us take a moment to take a deep breath as we remember.

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.

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.

Riley Clemmons - Loved By You
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-APIFV4NoMM>

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 -

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.

MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

Grace Got You
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmerCfxIqAc>

Amen.