

## 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 share that First United Church of Christ and Conference Center Second Life is a real UCC church with full standing in the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ.

And as a real UCC church, we want you to know:

No matter who you are,  
or where you are on life's journey,  
you are welcome here.

Our service will be in both voice and text.

You can find today's bulletin or worship guide in the red book at the back.

The music will be on the media viewer,  
so please be sure your voice and media are turned on.  
If you're not sure how to do that, just let someone know and we'll gladly help.  
There will also be a link in Nearby Chat so you can  
watch in your browser if the viewer isn't working for you.

As a real UCC congregation,  
we help support the wider church in prayer and in finances.  
We're deeply grateful for any offering you feel led to share.  
You can use the donation bowl next to the red book in the back or visit our website,  
[firstuccsl.org](http://firstuccsl.org).

My name is Rev. Yadi Martínez-Reyna,  
and I am one of the pastors in this community.  
Anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

Today we begin the holy season of Advent.  
The Advent Wreath you see is made of evergreen,  
a circle that reminds us of God's eternal,  
ever-renewing promise. In it are four candles—usually blue or purple,  
sometimes one pink—each marking one week of Advent.

A white candle rests at the center.

This Advent which is a monthlong journey we will gather here every Sunday night to reflect on the journey ahead which is unpredictable, and unknowable but deep in faith in our creator.

Each light will shine against the shadows of fear, doubt, despair and hatred.

Only candlelight guides the way.

Diana Butler Bass said it best "This is the season of poetry more than answers, of mystery more than conclusions.

It is existentially unsettling.

And perhaps the most honest season of the year.  
We just don't know.  
We wait in the dark.

Let us begin our service by lighting the first candle of advent.

Let us light the candle of Hope.

(Candle of Hope is lit)

In a world where empires shout and shadows seem to grow,  
this small flame reminds us that time belongs to God, not to fear.

As this light breaks the darkness, may our hearts awaken to hope,  
our minds awaken to truth, and our lives awaken to the quiet coming of Christ among  
us—even here, even now.

Amen

#### GATHERING MUSIC

Let There Be Light - Hillsong Worship

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7JsK50NGaA&list=RDQ7JsK50NGaA&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7JsK50NGaA&list=RDQ7JsK50NGaA&start_radio=1)

#### SCRIPTURES

Today's reading come from the book of Romans 13:11-14 (CEB)

As you do all this, you know what time it is.

The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep.

Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith.

The night is almost over, and the day is near.

So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons  
of light.

Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day,  
not in partying and getting drunk,  
not in sleeping around and obscene behavior,  
not in fighting and obsession.

Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ,  
and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.

The Word of God for the People of God,

Thanks be to God.

#### SERMON -

A Journey Through Time: Advent, Empire, and Second Life

Today is our first day of Advent, my second favorite season in the church calendar. Unlike a regular calendar with four seasons, the Christian calendar follows six seasons.

Each season has a cycle of stories and rituals based on the life and teachings of Jesus.

It begins in November—or really December (so now)  
—and it starts with Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

Pastor Chris and I talked about what book or readings we would use to guide our meditations during this season of Advent, and we are reading *A Beautiful Year: 52 Meditations on Faith, Wisdom, and Perseverance* by Diana Butler Bass, just in case you would like to join us in our readings.

We will also be using this book for our morning *Lectio Divina* meditations on Mondays and Fridays.

Shamelessly dropping in a note for you to join us at 8 a.m. SL time.

Today, as we light the first candle of hope, we enter Advent with the topic of time. Today's scripture is a letter from Paul to the people of Corinth.

It is believed to have been written around 55–58 AD during Paul's third missionary journey, to a unified community of Jewish and Gentile believers living under the Roman Empire.

This passage encourages believers to live aware of the tension around them—the power of empire, the decline of social, political, and moral life.

The Apostle Paul writes about being aware of how their Christian values in their daily life are reflected in all they do.

The hour has come to not be asleep but to wake up to the reality around them, to the danger of being overtaken by shadows.

This passage is a call to action: don't fall asleep, and don't ignore that the night is almost over and the day is near.

Don't go to parties and live like you have no care in the world, letting your desires control you.

The time has come for you to wake up and put on the weapons of light.

It is time to light it up, friends, and make the shadows retreat.  
The wise book of Ecclesiastes (3:1–8) says that there is a time for everything.  
A time to go to work.  
A time to sleep.

Or, if you have a superpower like me (ADD), time is a constantly fleeing thing. I chase doing one or two things at a time, trying to beat it.

Time, for someone dying, is a clock winding down.  
Time, for someone seeing a baby born, is the welcoming of new life with the hope for a bright tomorrow.

Time, for someone with Alzheimer's, might mean a confusing state of memories, so cues, displays, and reminders are needed to hold back time.

Time is always in motion, but it never moves.  
What is time for you?

For some, it is time for the Christmas season: a time to buy gifts and show people we love them with those gifts.

My eight-year-old has been counting the days to open gifts for Christmas and for his birthday, since he was born on this day. Each year, we change the paraments to blue or purple, we set the wreath and the candles, and we prepare for the Advent season.

What is the Advent season to you?

This week, I contemplated how many times, as a pastor, I have prepared for Advent. I smiled at the memories of working in a large congregation with a giant wreath coming down from the ceiling for spectacular lighting as the full 50+ symphony played and the choir sang.

I remember my time in a smaller congregation as an associate pastor, sitting in long discussions about the Christmas service, making sure we did not miss the traditions while slowly introducing them to cultural themes.

No matter what church I was serving, the planning and the crafting of things before Advent even arrived was part of the tradition—time set apart to prepare.

And even here in Second Life, as I found out, it is a lot easier to do!

I don't have to worry about getting my robes steamed, my stoles ready, the candles purchased, the wreath brought down from the attic, the Christmas tree placed out, and the paraments around the church changed.

With a touch of a button, Brother Doug has prepared a place for us, and here we are. In an email and communication with my amazing co-pastors, Chris and Pastor Jamie, we have a book, a series, an idea, and dates they will be here to lead the service.

Oh, it is all so magical—the way that Advent keeps coming each year, and with it the new possibilities of encountering the story of a child born to an empire that feared its arrival.

And today, this empire should fear its arrival, not dismiss it.  
Yes, I know this child was already born many, many, many times ago.

But despite that fact, this story is told each time to bring before us hope, joy, and love, inviting us to deepen our courage and our resolve to be the light beyond the candles we light at church.

Because, with regards to time, there is always an empire rising.  
The Roman Empire was the backdrop to the birth of Christ and the story of a child born in a stable.

In 2025, we live in an America I don't recognize, where the head of our country can publicly, and with cameras rolling, call someone "stupid," "piggy," among many other slurs, mainly toward women reporters.

This same individual can call out publicly for the execution of other political parties or people who stand against him.  
If this is not a form of empire, I don't know what is.

With the backdrop of the Roman Empire,  
the Jewish community continued to follow their rituals, their practices, celebrating their festivities,  
and honoring God.

Meanwhile, the Gentiles, being welcomed into a new way of being in community with their Jewish siblings,  
learned what it meant to belong, creating their own celebrations.

And it is within this community that a child was born,  
set to be killed from the very start by a ruler who did not wish to share his crown.

Each year we bring a new perspective, a new reflection,  
a new way to pull back the layers to reveal God's love to our diverse community that,  
just like a kaleidoscope, when seen in the light reveals the beautiful colors within.

Friends, as we go about our daily life trying to befriend time, make peace with time,  
or outrun time, remember the words of John in Revelation 22:13: Christ is the Alpha and Omega, beginning and end.

This Advent we begin acknowledging that our mortality is such that we don't know when we might meet our Maker.  
But each Advent we enter with hope, not in fear, but living abundantly, openly, and with gratefulness in our hearts.

Paul invited the Corinthian community to stay awake and to light up the path.  
Diana Butler Bass says, "Advent is a journey of time, flowing with wonder, a mysterious winding way to the place behind the darkness."

Today I am grateful for the light that my spiritual director shined my way to this community.

I'm grateful that you welcome me as a pastor despite my queerness, quirkiness, failings, and challenges.

Beyond that, I'm grateful for this Advent and for the possibilities of unrealized potential that we can build together as a community of faith in Second Life.

Church, what are you grateful and hopeful for?

Our Christian faith starts with the hope of a new tomorrow, a child born. Advent starts with gratitude, compassion, justice, courage, and service.

There is no threat of eternal damnation or being left behind in the darkness, but rather a discovery of pure love. For many, it is in our hearts in a personal way; for others, it is a metaphor; while for others, a long-awaited return that brings liberation.

Advent, friends, is more than an arrival.

It is the first candle of hope, a path of wonder as we await the newborn child.

So this week, as you move through your days, I invite you to practice Advent time: Maybe light a candle at home, even for a moment, and whisper one thing you are grateful for and one place you see hope.

Let that small act be your way of saying, "I choose the light. I choose to stay awake."

Because time does not belong to empire.

It does not belong to fear.

Time belongs to God.

Empires rise and fall, shadows lengthen and recede,  
but Christ—the Alpha and Omega—holds the beginning and the end.

Our call in this moment, in this Advent, in this strange digital sanctuary called Second Life, is to stay awake, to put on the armor of light, and to live as if the dawn is already breaking.

May we use our days and our minutes not in fear of the darkness,  
but in trust that the Light has come and is coming still.

May our gratitude shape our choices, our courage shape our witness,  
and our hope shape the way we love one another.

As we journey through Advent together,  
may we discover again that in God's time, even in the midst of empire and uncertainty,  
a child is born, love takes on flesh, and the shadows do not get the last word.

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.

Francesca Battistelli - Messiah (Official Lyric Video)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D14wX0K9XJQ&list=RDD14wX0K9XJQ&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D14wX0K9XJQ&list=RDD14wX0K9XJQ&start_radio=1)

#### 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.

In this moment, mi gente, I want to invite you into prayer.

#### Pastoral Prayer

Holy- One as we go from this place  
out into clocks and calendars, meetings and messages,  
may we remember that your time does not belong to empire,  
to fear, or to shadows.

May we remember that our time belongs to you.

And as people of Advent, help us to remain awake, and watching  
with our hearts like the candles we will light here each Sunday.

Oh Christ, our Alpha and Omega, hold our past in mercy, our present in courage and  
our future in your hands.

Amen

#### BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

May the Spirit guide your steps  
through this strange and beautiful journey

of pixels and prayers,  
of Second Life and first loves,  
until every corner of your world  
glows with the light of God's coming.  
Go in peace,  
to love and to serve,  
to resist the shadows  
and to shine with hope.

And may the blessing of God—  
Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit—  
be with you,  
remain with you,  
and flow through you,  
now and in all time to come.

Amen.

Music for the Journey

Go Tell It On The Mountain (feat. Melvin Crispell III & Chandler Moore) Maverick  
City Music | TRIBL

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1RpUV2AQ24&list=RDz1RpUV2AQ24&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1RpUV2AQ24&list=RDz1RpUV2AQ24&start_radio=1)