

## 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.  
This circle that reminds us of God's eternal,  
ever-renewing promise.  
In it are four candles each marking one week of Advent.

A white candle rests at the center.

This Advent which is a month long 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.

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

Let us light the candle of peace.

(Candle of peace is lit)

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.

Today we will also partake in Holy Communion.

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.

And now for our gathering song.

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

#### GATHERING SONG

Forrest Frank - THE PRESENT (Official Lyric Video)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdRzY1rbc7Y&list=RDzdRzY1rbc7Y&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdRzY1rbc7Y&list=RDzdRzY1rbc7Y&start_radio=1)

#### SCRIPTURES

Today’s reading come from the book of Mark 1:1-4 NRSV

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;  
make his paths straight,’ ”  
so John the baptizer appeared

in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

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

#### SERMON - Faith, Peace and the Rubik Square

Today is the second Sunday of Advent where we light the candle of peace.  
Peace—what a word. Every year we look at it and turn it around like a Rubik’s Cube.

Faith is the trust you have in the unseen. In Luke it is about nothing being impossible for God and us believing it (Luke 1:37). In Romans 10:17 it is defined as

something that your five senses cannot process. While in Hebrews (11:1) it is assurance and conviction to believe it is going to happen.

Peace, on the other hand, is not just the absence of conflict. Peace is the deep, steady center that believes wholeness is still possible, even when nothing around you looks settled yet.

Rubik's Cube.

A Rubik's Cube can be so annoying at times that I want to peel the stickers off and line them up—there. Just make it look finished, even if it isn't.

While for my eight-year-old on the spectrum, it is the coolest thing to spend his time trying to outrun his previous score to get it done. (Ironic.)

I guess it's your investment in time and energy. One of us wants to escape the frustration; the other leans into it. The cube is like the wilderness: everything feels scrambled, out of order, like there's no pattern.

Peace is what lets you keep turning the cube without panic. Faith is trusting there is a pattern, even when you can't see it yet. Faith, peace, and the Rubik's Cube.

But what is faith and peace when you're in the wilderness?

The wilderness is a term that often was used to talk about our desert fathers and mothers (holy, eccentric people who separated themselves from the world and did nothing but holy stuff).

Not many would sign up for that stuff. I hear some of my friends, when I invite them camping, give me a list of things they need. Often just asking, "Is it glamping? 'Cause just camping won't do it!"

It is in the wilderness we find John repeating the words from the prophet Isaiah, "Prepare the way!" John the Baptist, eccentric, wearing camel hair, properly smelly, and just weird-looking, calling out those who were believed to be holy and sacred in people's eyes—the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and anyone in the way—to get ready, and to repent.

The wilderness, friends, is also a term I associate with Lent, my favorite season. I mentioned last week that Advent was my second season because Lent is my favorite!

When I read Diana Butler Bass's idea that Advent begins in the wilderness, I had to reread the chapter.

But it made sense as it described John the Baptist as “an unhinged preacher draped in animal hair who was eating insects in the desert. A wild man in a wild place.”

How is that the Christmas story?

Well, where are you longing for peace?

Where does your faith get tested the most?

Ah... the wilderness.

Peace and faith are challenged the most in the wilderness.

This week Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, in their publication *Our Moral Movement*, wrote about “The Heresy of a God Who Hates Empty” and spoke about Charles Dickens’s classic story, *A Christmas Carol*.

I had not realized that when this book was published Charles Dickens was from England, and while he was touring the United States, he was disturbed by the violence of the slavery system that was justified by a Christian faith.

Such is the way many of our siblings from England and France, to name only the ones who have welcomed my transgender siblings fleeing the United States, feel.

Dickens was troubled by the heresy of slaveholder religion.

Are you troubled by the heresy of today’s America (MAGA) religion?

So Dickens writes a story of a selfish rich man who had too much (Ebenezer Scrooge) and a boy who had nothing (Tiny Tim) to unlock the human heart and expose prejudice, greed, and a distorted religion.

You and I know that *A Christmas Carol* today is relished and recognized as an American classic.

Has this been banned yet? (In America, 23,000 books have been banned in public schools nationwide since 2021. <https://pen.org/banned-books-list-2025/>)

But back in that time the review said, “This is ‘a ghost story.’”

Dickens’s way of seeking peace was to share in an artistic, literary way a view of heresy to a nation that was founded in religious freedom.

Peace is not pretending everything is calm.

Peace is believing there is still something that can be done and getting creative in new ways to do it without violence.

Peace looks like 7 million people gathering in October nationwide to protest injustice by dancing, by reading public poetry, by dressing up in silly costumes, dancing, and showing

a peaceful community saying, "No kings, no hate, no more violence!"

Peace for John was the message that the floor needed to be clear, the way needed to be made, because there was someone who was among them, liberating, challenging, and opening hearts, minds, and their eyes—literally and figuratively speaking.

Dr. William Barber II talks about heresy as a dangerous thing when it distorts the traditional teachings of the church, the message of Jesus, the life of the one who was born in a manger.

We await the Christ child to be born again, because maybe this time people will get the story of the one born with the Roman Empire looming, crushing the people.

When we see religion, a distorted message of division and public shaming, we, like Dickens, must call it out.

Peace is what has been left for us (John 14:27) by the Holy One.

As we seek for our hearts to be guarded and not troubled when we see injustice. It is believing that justice and wholeness will come—painfully slow at times—but they will come.

Dr. Barber II points out that it's nothing a pill or two can't fix, at least enough to "ease the troubled spirit and the pangs of consciousness."

It is my peace-filled hope, my friend, that we will continue to meet as a community, lean on each other, and find ways to tell the Christmas story and challenge heresy in America and beyond.

You and I know the wilderness, but it does not have to be uncomfortable. Because the wilderness is something we pass through on the way to safety or civilization. But some of our siblings from the past chose to stay there, and we might as well.

The wilderness, my friend, can be different than where we have been in the past. Because it is in the wilderness, in the troubled heart and mind, that you will find that second life of Advent—even here in Second Life—slowly showing you the way.

I usually pray, "Holy One, help my unbelief." The Psalmist tells us (Psalm 34:18) that the Holy One is near those who are of a contrite heart, or broken heart, or a crushed spirit, and as such you will never be turned away.

I truly believe we are a community with many gifts, different people with different talents and abilities, but together we create a path towards wholeness.

John prepared the way. Perhaps someone ran ahead to clear the path to walk (using my imagination).

In today's world you have people in the background doing research, social media, and administrative work at home while others are out in the streets.

As an introvert I can tell you I love my extroverted siblings.  
I might light the candle and then hand it over.

Whoever you are and wherever you find yourself, know we need each other.  
The second candle of Advent brings peace.

A Rubik's Cube for some to figure out.  
A light as clear in the shadows or as bright that can lead the way out of the wilderness.  
But however you understand peace, know that faith is not far behind, and the Holy One is with you in the wilderness and beyond.

So I want to leave you with a question and an invitation.

The question:

Where are you tempted to peel the stickers—to look away, to stay silent, to make it look finished when it isn't?

The invitation:

Choose one place this week where you will not look away.  
One conversation you will have.  
One book you will read or defend.

One trans or queer or Black or immigrant sibling you will stand beside.  
One lie dressed up as religion that you will gently, clearly name as heresy.

That is what peace looks like in the wilderness:  
not a Hallmark feeling, but a decision to keep turning toward justice,  
even when the pattern isn't clear yet.

Beloveds, the Holy One is already in the wilderness with us.  
The Christ child is already coming, again and again,  
to a world that keeps trying to ban the very stories that set us free.

May we prepare the way—  
in our hearts, in our homes, in this Second Life community,  
and in the world beyond our screens.

One step.  
One turn of the cube.  
One act of peace.  
Amen.

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.

Phil Wickham - Worth The Wait (Official Lyric Video)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqEitrRE6D4&list=RDFqEitrRE6D4&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqEitrRE6D4&list=RDFqEitrRE6D4&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.

If you feel comfortable where you are would you please join me as we come before the  
Holy-One in prayer.

#### Pastoral Prayer

Holy One,

we give you thanks for the stubborn, quiet gift of peace—  
the peace that keeps turning the cube when nothing seems to line up,  
the trust that you have left us a peace unlike the world's,  
ven when we cannot see a pattern,  
the peace that trusts you are still at work

even when empire looms large and heresy dresses itself up as religion.

We pray for all who are harmed  
by distorted versions of faith—

for those shamed in the name of Jesus,  
for those rejected because they are transgender,  
queer, Black, Brown, immigrant, disabled, poor,

for all who have been told they are outside your love.  
Let them hear a different voice today—  
the voice crying in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way,”  
not with hatred or fear,  
but with justice, mercy, and radical welcome.  
Amen.

#### BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

As you go into this week,  
may the Holy One meet you in every wilderness,  
give you courage to keep turning the cube of your life,  
and fill you with a peace that will not let you go.  
Go in peace, go in justice, go in love.  
Amen.

Music for the Journey

Let us dance...

Justin Timberlake - CAN'T STOP THE FEELING!  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru0K8uYEZww&list=RDrU0K8uYEZww&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ru0K8uYEZww&list=RDrU0K8uYEZww&start_radio=1)

Go in peace.