

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.

As we begin our worship, this is the Fourth Sunday in Advent, so tonight we will light the fourth candle in our Advent Wreath.

There are five candles in the Advent Wreath, one for each Sunday in Advent.

Three are purple, one is pink, and one is white.

On the first Sunday in Advent we light the first purple candle, symbolizing Hope.

This is also known as the Prophecy Candle.

On the second Sunday in Advent we light the second purple candle, symbolizing Peace.

This is also known as the Bethlehem Candle.

Last Sunday, we lit the pink candle, symbolizing Joy.

This is also known as the Shepherd's Candle.

Tonight we light the last purple candle, symbolizing Love. This is also known as the Angel's Candle.

Tonight we will also light the center candle, the white candle, known as the Christ candle.

Lighting this last candle represents the completion and fulfillment of the Advent season as it transitions into the Christmas celebration.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

Now let us all take a deep breath,

breathing in the peace of God

breathing out the stresses of the day

we may have carried here with us.

Let God hold them for you, at least for a while,

as we gather on this holy ground to worship God.

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

“People Look East”

<https://youtu.be/Vwel-dlLSAY?si=v3Sr5MufGb8klrvn>

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.

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

The lectionary gospel text for this Fourth Sunday in Advent comes from the Gospel According to Matthew.

It is Matthew's version of the birth story of Jesus, and it's all about Joseph.

It's interesting that Matthew calls this a "birth" story, since Joseph, according to the story,

contributes neither his own genetic material or the labor involved in giving birth. Matthew's gospel doesn't even record where Jesus was born.

And yet, it was because of the actions of this one man that Jesus was born.

Matthew's gospel then jumps in the next verses to the visit of the magi.

Let us listen to God speaking through the words of Matthew, chapter 1, verses 18 through 25.

MATTHEW 1:18-25 (NRSVUE)

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about:

His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph,
but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace,

he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,

"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife,
because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

“Dream God’s Dream”

Let us pray . . .

Ok, Matthew’s story about the birth of Jesus doesn’t have all the familiar trappings of Luke’s Christmas story – but I love it all the same.

It’s a story about the power of dreams, and about hope.

Dreams are funny things.

In our world of scientific facts and figures, dreams seem like an insubstantial, indeed foolish, basis for anything.

And yet, science tells us that we all need to dream, need to spend a certain amount of time in the sleep state of dreaming, or we die. Yet precisely what our dreams mean remains elusive.

I read a story about a couple who were having coffee a few days before Christmas. The wife told her husband, “I dreamed last night that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas.

What do you think this dream means?”

“Oh,” her husband replied, “you’ll know the day after tomorrow.”

The next morning, the woman woke up and smiled at her husband,

“I just dreamed again that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas.

What do you think this dream means?”

And he smiled back, “You’ll know tomorrow.”

On the third morning the woman turned to her husband and said the same thing,

“I just dreamed again that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas.

What do you think this dream means?”

And her husband said, “You’ll know tonight.”

That evening, the man came home with a small package and presented it to his wife. She was delighted.

She opened it gently, and when she did, she found a small book! And the book’s title was,

“The Meaning of Dreams.”

She was holding on tight to her own dream,

but Christmas brought something completely different.

Matthew’s gospel begins with the story of a man who was willing to dream God’s dream and make it his own.

You know, Joseph gets short shrift in most Christmas plays.

He’s seen as little more than that guy leading the donkey, who can’t seem to find his pregnant wife a room for the night.

But Matthew tells a different story.

Matthew explains how without Joseph, the miracle of Christmas would never have happened.

When Luke tells the story of Jesus’ birth, it’s all about Mary.

Mary visited by an angel. Mary’s choice to say “yes” to God.

Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth – the mother of John the Baptist.

But when Matthew tells the story, it’s all about Joseph.

Joseph’s struggle, Joseph’s courage, Joseph’s choice.

And what a choice it was.
Joseph undoubtedly had his own dreams.
He probably had it all planned out.
He was getting himself a wife, he had a trade. Could build himself a house to raise a family.
They would never be rich, but they could live comfortably.
But when we meet Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew,
he is grappling with the unexpected and upsetting intrusion of the Holy Spirit into his nicely-planned life.
His betrothed was pregnant and he knew the child wasn't his.
Jewish, Greek, and Roman law all demanded a man at least divorce his wife if she were guilty of adultery -
and could have her stoned.
And though Joseph and Mary were only engaged, that step was considered as binding as marriage,
thus the text calls Joseph her "husband."
Mediterranean society viewed with contempt a man who did not repudiate an unfaithful wife,
seeing it as a sign of weakness.
Scripture doesn't say how long it took Joseph to reach his decision or how many people he asked for advice.
But Matthew does say that Joseph resolved to do the "righteous" thing -
which in his world was to follow the law and divorce Mary.
But we also know he struggled with this decision, because instead of doing it publicly,
or demanding the highest penalty, death,
he "had in mind to divorce her quietly."
Joseph is shown as a man of strong character - willing and able to make the hard but proper choice -
yet also a man of compassion.
Joseph would have to start again.
Make new plans.
And then, once again, God intruded.
God's messenger, the angel, didn't appear to Joseph when he was wide awake.
Instead, he visited Joseph only in a dream.
Unlike Mary, Joseph didn't get the reassuring presence of an angel in person, or even the spectacle of a burning bush like Moses.
All Joseph had was a dream - a dream that intruded into Joseph's carefully considered plans and decisions.
Every Advent we hear the words of Isaiah and John the Baptist that we should repent to prepare the way of the Lord.
That is exactly what this dream called Joseph to do -
repent, the word in Greek literally means to turn around and face the other way, towards God.
For Joseph that would mean changing his mind
and taking what would have been a very lonely and courageous stand against law and custom -
wed Mary, give her the protection of his name, and adopt or claim her son as his own, giving the child his protection as well.
He named the child "Jesus," as the angel in the dream commanded.

“Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Joshua,” which means “God saves.” Well, Joseph could save too, and became the the face of God for Mary and her child. This dream didn’t give Joseph rational explanations or scientific facts – no solid assurances that he was doing the right thing.

Instead, all Joseph’s dream gave him was inspiration and hope.

Joseph dreamed, and discovered that he could behave in a new way, that he must behave in a new way –

for God’s dream to be realized here on earth.

In this story from Matthew. Joseph, as much as John the Baptist, is the quintessential Advent figure –

because he does what John preaches – repents and prepares the way of the Lord.

The Greek word translated as “repent,” metanoia,

carries with it the implication of looking forward, towards the future.

What might this story have to say to us in our time and place? In our troubled world?

There is so much fear, so much uncertainty, so much pain.

We can do the expected thing, what some on the Christian right might even call the “righteous” thing –

go along with the show of force by the powers and principalities of the world.

In the US, that means going along with ICE raids, going along with mass deportations,

going along ripping away the protections of citizenship for thousands,

going along with taking way health care for millions,

going along with blowing up boats,

going along with the dismantling of the protections and social safety net of our government.

Law and custom would say we accept the authority of those in power,

do what is expected of us, look away as our neighbors are dragged off

and the voices of resistance are targeted or silenced.

Or we can hold fast to the angel’s words, “do not be afraid,”

a phrase that in one form or another occurs 365 times in the Bible, one for each day of the year.

We could also keep staring at the past and busy ourselves with blame and regrets for the actions, of others or ourselves, that led us to where we are now.

Or we can turn ourselves around, repent, turn towards God and the future.

We can refuse to look away so we can bear witness to the suffering around us.

We can look for the signs of the Spirit at work: signs of resistance, signs of compassion, signs of hope.

We can listen for the voices of angels, heard in many ways,

offering us ways to embody God’s love in the world.

We can dare to dream.

I’m a fan of Heather Cox Richardson, a history professor who never planned to become a lifeline for the resistance.

There she was, writing her books, teaching her college classes,

and posting daily to her free blog to chronicle what was happening in the US so future historians would have a record.

She did it quietly for years and not a lot of people noticed. But in the face of rampant dis and misinformation,

people looked for new sources to understand what was happening in their world

and began to find other voices, like Heather’s.

Her blog took off.

Now, in addition to her daily blog, "Letters from an American," which is free on Substack,

she posts at least twice a week on YouTube, setting out as best she can just the facts of what is happening.

Answering people's questions. Keeping people informed.

One of the things she often says, is that now is the time to dream, to dream about what we want our government, our country, to look like.

Because it's not enough to be against something, to be against what is happening under the current administration.

We have to be for something and then work to make that dream a reality.

And when we dream together, we have hope.

Hope for a better future for our families, our children, our country, our world.

But like Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus, it begins with a dream.

With faith and courage, Joseph took a risk

and because of his choice Divine Love was incarnated on earth, not only in the child, but in Joseph himself.

Joseph practiced the ultimate in hospitality -

he opened his heart and his spirit, his home and his whole life, to God.

Isn't that what we are called every Advent to do?

Isn't that the true meaning of Christmas?

Joseph isn't just that other figure in the crèche - the one who isn't a shepherd or a wise man or an angel -

he's the Gospel's prime example of the power of God's call to transform our decisions and our lives - if we let it.

If we are willing, like Joseph, to follow God's dream in us, make God's dream our own.

If we have the courage to look to the future with hope.

And hope does take courage -

no wonder the angel in Matthew's dream told him not to be afraid.

It takes courage to hope in spite of the reasonable evidence -

facts and figures and news stories - to the contrary,

courage to persevere beyond the apparent,

courage not to be satisfied or discouraged or dissuaded by present circumstances,

courage to follow a dream to a place where you have not yet been,

and into becoming the person you have not yet become.

Pretty scary stuff. If we do not anticipate the Christmas event - the birth of Christ -

with both hope and just a little bit of anxious fear, then we haven't really considered the implications

of God's being born in us and among us.

As we prepare this Advent,

we too, might ask what happens when God is an intrusion into our nicely laid plans and decisions?

What happens when we are asked to see righteousness and being faithful in a whole new way than we have seen it before?

What problems are we facing that call for a change in our way of thinking?

Where do we need a dream to face some hard realities?

Where are your dreams and visions, needs and intuitions this day?

Is God whispering in your heart, in your sleep, in your feelings, in your hunches?

Are you holding on tight to your own dreams, or your feelings of hopelessness or are you willing to dream God's dream for you, for us, and to follow it to embody God's love in the world?
Amen.

"Only Joseph" - Garrison Doles
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFPPiYjlGP8>

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.
We pray all this in the name of the one who taught us to eat and to pray together,
saying:
Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kin-dom, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kind-dom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

PRAYER RESPONSE

"Somewhere In Your Silent Night" - Casting Crowns
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nT-5cP4BeoI>

Let us pray.
Help us make a place for you, Lord Jesus,
In our hearts, in our dreams,

A place to love and to welcome you
This Christmas.
Make us your Bethlehem.
Be born again,
Not in a manger,
But in us.
Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

And now,
Our worship is over,
but our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting
for you to dream God's dream this Christmas.
Go in peace, come again in hope.
Amen.

“Dream God’s Dream” – Bryan Sirchio
<https://youtu.be/fpsxQi4-8b4?si=mwNDnH9gVc1brrOC>

GO IN PEACE