

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

"Wade in the Water" - Sweet Honey in the Rock

<https://youtu.be/RRpzEnq14Hs?si=nIkdrq54xJEbgev5>

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

This is the Sunday after Epiphany.

Baptism of Christ Sunday

Epiphany is not just a liturgical placeholder between Christmas and Ash Wednesday, it's a whole season.

And it's not just the day we remember the story of the magi visiting the Holy Family bringing gifts.

It's a time to explore how God is manifested in the world, every day.

It's a season of revelation and challenge.

The stories of this season remind us that there is more to this world than what we accept as "ordinary."

Today's lectionary reading is the story of Jesus's Baptism as told in the Gospel of Matthew.

It's a familiar story about Jesus's cousin John, standing out in the River Jordan, preaching about repentance, when Jesus comes to him.

Now John doesn't talk to Jesus about repentance,

In fact, in Matthew's Gospel John doesn't want to baptize him at all.

But Jesus insists,

Perhaps because he understands why even he needs a baptism of "repentance."

The Greek word translated as "repent" or "repentance" is "metanoia," which has a slightly different meaning

"Repentance" as it is commonly understood, focuses on the past - on what you did wrong, on your sin, on what you need to change.

"Metanoia" means putting on a new mind set, it focuses on the future, on how you will think and behave going forward.

It is similar to the Jewish idea of "teshivah,"

Which literally means physically turning your body towards God.

Both metanoia and teshivah ask us whether we are going to focus our attention on ourselves and the past or on God moving into the future.

And that's just what Jesus needed.

He had been living a quiet private life, hidden in plain sight.

But he was hearing the call to live into all he was born to be.

It was time.

But before that, Jesus had to go into the wilderness and be tested.

The lectionary passage ends at the end of chapter 3, of Matthew's Gospel,

But I want to go just one verse further,

Because there's more to the story.

Let us listen to God speaking in the words of Matthew Chapter 3, verse 13 to Chapter 4, verse 1.

MATTHEW 3:13-4:1 (NRSVUE)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

But Jesus answered him,

"Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Then he consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him.

And a voice from the heavens said,

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God!

"This is a Test"

Let us pray...

I had a sweet sermon planned,

About the natural elements of this story,
And what it says to us about our relationship to creation,
And how God is revealed in the natural world.
I really did.
Oh well, maybe next year.
Because the Spirit wouldn't let me preach it.
You know how the dove led Jesus into the wilderness,
well that's me.
So much has happened in the past week,
And so I hear the call of this scripture differently today,
Particularly the last line of the part of the story we read.
"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil."
I've been thinking about what it means to wade into the waters of a baptism of
repentance,
And then to go into the wilderness to be "tested by the devil,"
Because, Lord, I think we are there,
In the wilderness, with the devil.
And it's a test.
What's been on my heart is the juxtaposition of 2 stories and 2 songs
One story happened 4 years ago and one happened this past week.
Both involve life and death, fear and grief,
Both involve the wilderness, and evil and sin,
Both involve ice, two different kinds,
The use of power by representatives of the government and the love of neighbors for
each other.
Both involve witnesses to tragedy and both invite us to turn our faces,
indeed our whole bodies, towards God, and the stubborn persistence of hope.
And the songs, both are African-American spirituals probably dating from the time of
slavery in America.
I'll try to weave these elements together and see what emerges.
Wherever you are, and if you are able, I hope you will join me in singing the
familiar verses,
With your mics off, unfortunately,
But saying or singing the words aloud allow them to reverberate in your body..
Here we go.

In January 2022, 3 children played on a frozen pond in their apartment complex,
Slipping and sliding around, pretending to ice skate,
Their dark skin highlighted by the white and pale blue of the snow and ice.
One was 6-year old Zakiyah.
They thought they were on familiar ground, solid ice, but they had entered the
wilderness.

[Sing it with me if you can]
Wade in the water. Wade in the water children,
Wade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water.
[again]
Wade in the water. Wade in the water children,
Wade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water.

This past Wednesday, a Renee Good and her wife dropped their 6-year old son off at school.

They were driving home when they came upon a different kind of ICE.

They stopped to support their neighbors who had been targeted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents.

They thought they were on familiar ground, but they had entered the wilderness.

[Sing it with me if you can]

Wade in the water. [Wade in the water children,

Wade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water.

[again]

Wade in the water. Wade in the water children,

Wade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water.

That Sunday in 2022, Dusti Talavera was looking out the window of her apartment. She saw the 3 children were playing on the iced over pond in the middle of the complex.

Then she saw them fall in.

She was a witness and she had a choice.

She could look away and go about her Sunday afternoon,

After all, what did those children have to do with her?

She could call 911 and hope it all turned out alright.

But instead, she cried out, threw on her shoes and before she knew it she was out there on the ice.

She managed to get 2 of the children out, an 11-year-old boy and 4-year-old girl, taking their outstretched hands and pulling them to safety.

But she couldn't get the last child, 6-year-old Zakiyah, a

nd in trying, fell through the thin ice into the freezing water beneath.

She grabbed Zakiyah, held her head above the water,

But the girl was unconscious, a dead weight in her arms,

And Dusti couldn't get her or the little girl out.

[Sing it with me if you can]

Wade in the water. Wade in the water children,

Wade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water.

[again]

Wade in the water. Wade in the water children,

Wade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water.

The narratives of division and doom are so strong today, that any effort to work for unity and harmony,

Or to peacefully resist oppression, are treated as a threat by the government or derided as "kumbaya," too saccharine and unrealistic, by those who have given into the rhetoric of fear and despair.

What good do peaceful protests do? I have heard that many times over the past year, Nothing is changing, it's only getting worse.

To think we have any chance to make a difference is as naïve as the song most of sang as children.

I've spoken about this song before,

about it's real meaning, and how its real meaning and quiet power have been

forgotten in modern times.

Melanie Demore, singer, composer, choral conductor and self-styled “vocal activist,”

bemoans how a hymn and sung prayer of the Gullah community of former slaves off the coast of the Carolinas

came to be painted as sappy and used as a weapon of scorn.

“Kumbaya” means “come by here” in Gullah creole,

and according to the Library of Congress, was first recorded by a Gullah man, H. Wylie, in 1926.

It’s the song of a people who were abused physically, emotionally, spiritually, who felt abandoned by the universe,

But who still called out to God.

“Kumbaya,” Lord, “come by here.”

“It is about ‘don’t leave me here,’” Demore says, “see me, hear me.”

[Sing it with me if you can]

Come by here, my Lord, come by here

Come by here, my Lord, come by here

Come by here, my Lord, come by here

O Lord, come by here.

Back in 2022, Dusti was in the freezing water holding a child,

Then Zakiyah’s 13-year-old cousin threw Dusti a rope,

She grabbed onto it and was pulled out of the water,

Then she could pull out Zakiyah.

They got her to the shore and put her on the pavement.

She was not breathing and had no pulse.

[Sing it with me if you can]

Someone’s dying, Lord, come by here

Someone’s dying, Lord, come by here

Someone’s dying Lord, come by here

O Lord, come by here

Last Wednesday, as Renee slowly steered her car away from the ICE officers,

As recorded on one officer’s body cam video,

You can hear her speak through the open car window,

“That’s fine, dude,” she told him, “I’m not mad at you.”

Then he raised his gun and shot her in the face.

“F**king bitch,” he said.

[Sing it with me if you can]

Someone’s dying, Lord, come by here

Someone’s dying, Lord, come by here

Someone’s dying Lord, come by here

O Lord, come by here

Sometimes before singing this song with an audience, Melanie DeMore asks the audience some questions:

Have you ever felt invisible?

Have you ever felt lost?
Have you ever felt afraid?
Have you ever felt alone?
Have you ever felt hopeless? Helpless? Abandoned?
Have you ever felt in danger?

[Sing it with me if you can]
Someone's praying, Lord, come by here
Someone's praying, Lord, come by here
Someone's praying, Lord, come by here
O Lord, come by here

As most of you probably know by now,
Renee Good didn't survive.
Her wife, Becca, her parents, and her three children are left to mourn,
And a nation's heart was broken
By the videos of the murder and an image of the car's glove compartment full of
stuffed animals.

[Sing it with me if you can]
Someone's crying, Lord, come by here
Someone's crying, Lord, come by here,
Someone's crying, Lord, come by here,
O Lord, come by here

Back in 2022, three Sheriff's Deputies arrived at the lake and immediately began CPR
on Zakiyah.
On their body cam video you can hear the AED cuing them to time their chest
compressions,
"Come on, baby, come on sweetheart," you can hear them say.
"Come back to us."
You can hear in their voice the moment she takes a breath.
The paramedics arrive, and the deputies carried her off to the waiting ambulance,
Someone says, "she's crying."
In EMS that's what you want to hear, if a child is crying she's breathing.

[Sing it with me if you can]
Someone's crying, Lord, come by here
Someone's crying, Lord, come by here,
Someone's crying, Lord, come by here,
O Lord, come by here

Jesus went into the water to be baptized,
All the way under,
John holding him, supporting him so he didn't drown.
Water in his eyes, maybe up his nose, down his throat.
And when he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened up,
The wall that divided the heavens from the earth, there was a crack in it.
He could see all the way through.
He had literally turned his face towards God.

And the Spirit of God, as a dove, descended upon him.
And a voice came from the heavens, saying:
“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

[Sing it with me if you can]
Someone’s singing, Lord, come by here
Someone’s singing, Lord, come by here
Someone’s singing, Lord, come by here
O Lord, come by here

Zakiyah spent two nights in the hospital, and went home.
When Zakiyah’s father, Walter, saw the body cam video, he was amazed.
“I’m overwhelmed,” he said, “and thankful that my daughter is still here.”
Speaking of the deputies and other first responders, he became emotional.
“When I saw them on the video performing their duties, you can see the passion and emotion in them by what they were saying.
‘Come on, baby. Come on, baby. Yes. Come on. Come on, sweetheart. Come on.’
Like they were talking to their own children.”
Like she was their own child.
In interviews afterwards, Dusti said:
“I think God saved her, and used me, you know?”
Deputies David Rodriguez, Blaine Moulton and Justin Dillard agreed.
“I saw some of the headlines said that, you know, ‘three deputies brought her back to life,’” Dillard said,
“and we don’t raise people from the dead.
We do life-saving measures, the things that we were trained to do.
We were all the instruments that day, but God was the hand.”
Dusti couldn’t save little Zakiya by herself, it took everyone working together,
Dusti, Zakiya’s cousin, the police, EMTs, God.

[Sing it with me if you can]
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
O Lord, come by here.

The other people on the scene this past Wednesday couldn’t save Renee Good.
But they were not helpless, they recorded what happened on their phones.
Having witnessed the murder, they could have run away, kept their heads down in fear, but they didn’t.
They shared their videos with the world, so we all can stand as witnesses.
And having seen, we too have a choice.
Many have already chosen, and large protests have been held in honor of Renee Good all over the country.
Many contributed to the GoFundMe campaign for Renee’s family.
In fact, the family got more than they asked for, closed the campaign already and have asked people to give to others in need instead.
Even in terrible grief they are choosing to act in love.

[Sing it with me if you can]

Come by here, my Lord, come by here
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
Come by here, my Lord, come by here
O Lord, come by here.

That's Epiphany.

God made manifest in our world.

As God is revealed in the wings of a dove, the hands of a woman, the rope of a teenager,

the camera phone of witnesses, the donations of strangers, and the dedication of men doing their job.

Epiphany is not without danger.

After the magi left the holy family, Herod slaughtered children and the family had to flee to Egypt.

After Jesus's baptism, he too found himself in the wilderness, someplace unfamiliar,

and being tested by the devil, the force of evil and sin.

After Jesus's baptism, John is arrested and killed.

Zakiyah's story has a happy ending, other Epiphany stories, like Renee's, do not.

All too soon we will probably here of another person kidnapped, deported, beaten up,

or killed by officials of the government instead of saved by them.

The powers and principalities that push the narratives of division don't go away just because we see the star

or hear the voice through the crack in the clouds,

See God at work in our everyday world.

Just the opposite.

Epiphany stories also reveal the line between sin and evil and the kin-dom of the God of Love.

We all carry within us the potential for evil, for denying our connection to each other, that we are all children of God.

We all carry within us the potential for sin,

action or inaction that denies or ruptures the relationship, the connection, between each other, and therefore with God.

But we also carry within us the spark of Divine Love and the gift of persistent hope that Love will prevail.

The murder of Renee Good was sin by that ICE officer,

but it was also a manifestation of sinful policies, institutions, and systems at work in our world.

Policies, institutions, and systems with which we are too often, and sometimes unknowingly, complicit.

In times of trouble, we are tested. What will we choose?

Dusti, the sheriff's deputies who resuscitated little Zakiyah, the witnesses with their camera phones,

those who shared the story and the videos and made donations,

the peaceful marchers in the streets in the days since Renee's murder, Renee's family, and Renee herself

They all choose to wade into the water,

to affirm connection, relationship to each other, and to act with the stubborn hope that even when all seems lost,

And we can be forgiven for thinking God has abandoned us,
A little girl's lips are blue,
A nation is in turmoil,
And the waters are troubled indeed,
God is present, working in unexpected ways, through ordinary people, like us.
If each of us chooses to act out of love,
Not out of fear, or hate,
And not giving into the temptations of despair, of anger, or of violence,
The small ripples we individually make in the water can merge to form a big wave,
we don't have to do it alone, no can we,
Then strengthened by God there will be good trouble in the waters of this land,
indeed.
Come by here, Lord,
Help us wade into the waters,
To be your hands, your face,
In our troubled world.
Because we know, Lord,
That this is a test
For all of us.
Amen.

I hope you will accept Melanie DeMore's invitation to sing with her,
as she combined these two spirituals in beautiful ways.
Melanie Demore, "Wade in the Water and Kumbaya"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSfX-22XIOM>

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.

WORDS FOR THE JOURNEY

Our closing hymn is new, written recently by Christopher Grundy,
using the closing lines of the Epiphany story of the magi,
Who warned in a dream, go home by a different road,
So they wouldn't have to tell Herod where the baby Jesus was to be found,
And so saved his life.
It was a small act of resistance, but it had life-changing consequences for us all.
Many UCC churches are using this song, last Sunday or this Sunday.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

(adapted from Bob Holmes)
May the quiet fire of God's love arise with in you.
Enlighten your steps in this world,
And may you be like the burning bush,
The presence of God for each other,
That holy healing light of love,
The breath of God made manifest in you.
Our worship is over,
Our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting,
What will we choose?
Go in peace, come again in hope.
Amen.

CLOSING

"Home By Another Way" - Christopher Grundy
https://youtu.be/dkZ1JJlJa14?si=OcfPOvXWR8_8-p0v

GO IN PEACE!

