

## 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.

I'm really glad to be here today, and I want to thank my siblings for teaming up with me—being my co-conspirators with the One who calls us, and for covering for me while I was away.

I am still in the middle of moving down in South Texas.  
Although things are getting colder down here I am certain it is a stronger winter storm where you might be in the north, and east of the United States.

I pray you are safe and warm where you are.

## INVOCATION -

Will you pray with me?  
Holy One, welcome us as we are.  
Gather our minds that are racing, our hearts that are heavy,  
and our bodies that are tired.

Let this be a safe place to breathe, to be honest, and to be held.

Open our ears to the Gospel, open our eyes to your light,  
and open our hands to one another.

Shape us into a people of the Kind-om-  
where healing, dignity, and belonging are near.  
Be present in our singing, our silence, and our listening.  
And let your love move in this room.  
May it be so.  
Amen.

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

Dolly Parton - Light of a Clear Blue Morning ft. Lainey Wilson, Miley Cyrus, Queen  
Latifah & Reba  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McaD2PG8jOE&list=RDMcaD2PG8jOE&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=McaD2PG8jOE&list=RDMcaD2PG8jOE&start_radio=1)

#### SCRIPTURES

Today's reading come from the Epistle of the Gospel of Matthew 4:12 15 and then 22-  
23 (The Message)

When Jesus got word that John had been arrested, he returned to Galilee.  
He moved from his hometown, Nazareth, to the lakeside village Capernaum,  
nestled at the base of the Zebulun and Naphtali hills.

This move completed Isaiah's revelation:  
Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
road to the sea, over Jordan,  
Galilee, crossroads for the nations.'

People sitting out their lives in the dark  
saw a huge light;  
Sitting in that dark, dark country of death,  
they watched the sun come up.'

This Isaiah-prophesied revelation came to life in Galilee the moment  
Jesus started preaching.

He picked up where John left off:  
"Change your life. God's kingdom is here."

Walking along the beach of Lake Galilee,  
Jesus saw two brothers: Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew.  
They were fishing, throwing their nets into the lake.  
It was their regular work.  
Jesus said to them, "Come with me.

I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you.  
I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass."

They didn't ask questions, but simply dropped their nets and followed.  
A short distance down the beach they came upon another pair of brothers,

From there he went all over Galilee.  
He used synagogues for meeting places and taught people the truth of God.  
God's kingdom was his theme—that beginning right now they were under God's  
government, a good government!

He also healed people of their diseases and of the bad effects of their bad lives.  
Word got around the entire Roman province of Syria.

People brought anybody with a sickness, whether mental, emotional, or physical.  
Jesus healed them, one and all.  
More and more people came, the momentum gathering.

Besides those from Galilee,  
crowds came from the  
"Ten Towns" across the lake, others up from Jerusalem and Judea, still others from  
across the Jordan.

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

SERMON - Taken—And Still Called: Camera, Candle, Gospel

The Gospels, to me, are books that document incidents and stories about the life of  
Jesus Christ.  
And I'll be honest: never have they felt more alive to me than in this season.

As I prayed through this text and sat with it, the phrase that kept rising in me was  
simple—and heavy:  
John is in prison.  
John has been captured.  
John has been apprehended.  
John has been taken from his friends and his ministry, and thrown in a place of  
despair.

That's the background of today's passage.  
John is taken—and Jesus begins.

And while John is in a cell, Jesus is walking. He's moving into Galilee, and he's  
calling ordinary people to follow him.  
He's saying, drop your nets.  
Step out of what's familiar.

Come with me.  
The text speaks about darkness and light, shadows and hope.

But don't miss the tension: John being jailed for speaking against a powerful political individual is the backdrop as Jesus begins his ministry. So I want to name something that sits close to many of our bodies right now: fear is real.

Fear of being taken is real.  
Fear of standing for our neighbors or friends being apprehended or taken is real.

Will I get shot for doing so?  
Will I get arrested too, even if I have my documents on me?

A couple of days ago, I was pulled over for not making a complete stop. I had my partner on the phone and tried to tell her what the badge number was, or his name, but he did not have it on.

I could not see his face; he wore a visor of some kind. He took my I.D. and walked away, and my heart started pounding.

Now here's what's complicated: I know law enforcement. My brother is a police officer. I used to be a police recruit and, in a past life, worked closely with law enforcement when I managed a security firm.

But the reports I'm hearing about police officers teaming up with ICE (Immigration enforcement Agents) has made them now someone to fear.

Do you see how complicated that just got for people in the margins?  
Fear.

I am okay to be in this country.  
But does it matter if I'm brown?

There is a directive that is governmentally sanctioned in the United States. There was a governmental sanction that picked up John for calling out those in power. John was taken. And Jesus—Jesus kept walking.

Jesus picks up where John left off. He goes around calling people—like Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew—to leave their nets, their boats, their routines, their comfort, and follow him.

And I keep wondering: what makes people do that?  
What makes people put their bodies into the story?

Because I've seen that same "follow me" energy in our time. This past January 20th, the call was placed out to all clergy members of all denominations,

faith traditions, and walks of life to go to Minneapolis and stand together to protest the killing of a woman by ice agents and protest the way people were being treated.

My social media feed was filled with my friends from the Unitarian church, the United Church of Christ, The Methodist, The Baptist, and many other faith traditions—and of no faith traditions—showing up.

Then there was the Priest Rev. Hirschfeld, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire, telling clergy on January 12 during a vigil in Concord it was time to get ready to stand up for reals.

(I'm paraphrasing here) He told the clergy it was ready to "put their bodies on the line" between the vulnerable and the "powers of this world".

And I couldn't help but think: is that what it looks like to drop your nets?

What makes clergy put on a stole over all the clothes they can find, to stand and kneel in sub-temperature weather in Minneapolis?

Because the Gospels are not distant stories.  
The Gospels are alive.

And sometimes it frustrates me—because it feels like some people have other Bibles that don't have the gospels, or their lens are so clogged they can't see what is happening.

The prophet Isaiah's revelation comes alive in Galilee, and Jesus is picking up right where John was leaving off.

And today, the baton is a camera, a video, a live feed showing everything going on around us.  
It will be the testimony of times.

It might be the video that calls out for justice around the world.  
Because we all know how narratives get spun.

We know how power manages the story.  
Did you know that a PR firm, a crisis management firm that specializes in establishing brands but also doing damage control when it needs it, can cost up to \$20,000 a month?

We know how you can be portrayed as a nice puppy even if that dog just tore into some chickens.

But Jesus' message from the start is simple: the Kingdom of God is near.  
Or as Pastor Chris likes to say, the Kind-om of God is near.

BUT what does that mean?

The Message says Jesus used synagogues as gathering places—  
and he also met people right where they were.  
Not just in a sanctuary.

Everywhere he went, people brought him those who were ill, those who were hurting,  
those who were carrying the weight of life.

The Message writes: “He also healed people of their diseases and of the bad effects  
of their bad lives.  
People brought anybody with a sickness, whether mental, emotional or physical. Jesus  
healed them, one and all.”  
That’s the Kind-om of God: healing, dignity, restoration, belonging.

And when the world feels like it’s unraveling,  
I remember what the beloved Fred Rogers said:  
“When I was a boy I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me,  
“Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.””

Hope in action.

That is what Minneapolis looked like—clergy in all kinds of stoles, people singing,  
holding hands.  
Then they left.

But the air and the people around could still hear their unity calling out for peace  
and healing.  
And before I could even finish my sermon, another man gets killed and shot by ice  
agents.

And the people kept helping each other.  
We can’t deny that that weight is heavy on us—  
that sense that bad news keeps stacking.

Rev. Nadia Bozlweber said in a response to a letter by a subscriber to her writings  
“the Corners” that it feels like Tetris—blocks coming faster until you lose.

And that’s why Epiphany matters right now.  
We’ve been reading “A Beautiful Year 52: Meditations of Faith by Diana Butler Bass.”

And Diana Butler Bass says,  
“Epiphany is the season we need now. We need its clarity, its sharp starkness.

Maybe our moment in history is an epiphany—the ordinary is being pulled back to  
reveal that which has been hidden from view.”  
Epiphany is the “aha moment.”

The revealing.  
The light is coming on.

So, I ask myself:

Was this the reality of our African American siblings during the civil rights movement?

Was this the reality of our Asian siblings after Pearl Harbor?

And what do we do?

Isaiah gives us language for that kind of moment.

The Message says: "People sitting out their lives in the dark saw a huge light; Sitting in that dark, dark country of death, they watched the sun come up."

So here's what we're going to do today: we're going to practice light.

And if you come in carrying grief, fear, or anger, you can also use the prayer stations around the sanctuary and light a candle for those lost and for your own, and spend a moment in prayer.

You can do this on your own time, or as we pray today, you can feel free to walk to the area and pray there. Prayer, friends, is faith in action.

Perhaps in today's world it looks like organizing. Because we mourn—and we organize.

And I know some of us feel stuck because fear is real.

Perhaps like me you can't hit the streets just yet in fear to be picked up and thrown in a van to the unknown—to El Paso Texas, to the tents out by the border, be CapCot el Salvador prison, be Alligator Valley in Florida—and the list can go on.

Fear is real.

But we cannot let fear control us, depression overwhelm us, and the shadows darken the room entirely.

Because Epiphany is about light.

Epiphany is Greek for epiphaneia (manifestation). It's the "aha moment." And here is where Jesus' call gets practical.

Following Jesus and dropping your net is different for each of us, and don't let anyone judge you, or guilt trip you into something.

You will feel the Holy One nudging, you will see signs of Epiphany in your life. What does it mean to follow Jesus in your context?

Does it mean making care packets?

Does it mean knitting gloves, hat scarfs for those in the front lines?

Does it mean doing the work behind the scenes with a computer?

If you're feeling the shadows closing in, let me stand or sit by you and listen, or read, send a note, sit with me—but don't sit alone, not for too long.

Because I will pray with you.

I believe in prayer.

A prayer that is faith and hope in action—not as an escape, but as fuel.

Rev. Dr. Claudio Carvahaes said, “Prayer doesn’t protect anyone, doesn’t bring food to anyone table, it does not provide a doctor for those dying.”

But he also says, “Prayers are a breath of life into a world that can shift the flow of movements and webs of connectivity.”

So maybe today we pray with a lump in our throat. Maybe we can’t say the words. But it’s okay.

And when I say Jesus is calling you to follow, I need to be clear what I mean in our United Church of Christ way: it’s not a pressured “come up here and say Jesus is your savior” moment. “Grace and salvation were given to you no questions asked.”

This is about how we live as people of the Gospel.

For some, following looks like being on the front lines with gas masks and tactical gear protecting their neighbors.

For others, it is being home writing to their congress, their senators, anyone that can listen for peace.

For others it is financial support to organizations doing the work in the front lines like Creekside UCC and First Congregational church in Minneapolis.

Friends, we can’t look the other way and not see the Gospels calling for us to pay attention.

Do not fear.

Do not let the shadows win.

Dr Cavahaes says, “Emptiness scares us.

The ways we have been formed and our historical traumas play a part.”

But he also says, “A sense of togetherness saved me from falling into the abyss of despair.”

And this is where I want to land:

“A revolutionary prayer makes us aware of the ones with whom we are in solidarity so that

we can count ourselves among those who are fighting for life, especially with those beyond the commons,

what is underwood as ‘the public.’”

I don’t have the answers.

I have the gospels.

I have prayer.

A Jesus who picked up where John left off despite the reality around that time.

A Jesus who said follow me and spoke of the Kind-om of God by saying that what we do to the least of these we do to him.

A Jesus who calls us into the community and prays alone and with his disciples.

So, in your own world, and in your own body able way, would you drop the net and follow?

Church, may we find togetherness,  
and may we continue to light a candle in these times for ourselves and others.  
May it be so.  
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.

We shall overcome: Love will rise again | Nimo Patel & Daniel Nahmod  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6FN0EmK87c&list=RDGMEMQ1dJ7wXfLlqCjwV0xfSNbAVMS6FN0EmK87c&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6FN0EmK87c&list=RDGMEMQ1dJ7wXfLlqCjwV0xfSNbAVMS6FN0EmK87c&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.  
Pastoral Prayer

Holy One of Light,  
Fear is real, and we bring it to you.

When shadows feel heavy and the news keeps stacking,  
steady our hearts.  
Jesus, you kept walking when John was taken—so call us again.  
Show us how to drop our nets and follow you in our own body-able way.

Make us people of the Kind-om:  
healing, dignity, and belonging.

Help us light a candle for ourselves and for others,  
and not let the darkness win.  
May it be so. Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Go in peace—not ruled by fear.

Go in courage—held by grace.

Go in love—walking with Jesus.

Drop your net.

Carry the light.

And may the Kind-om of God be near you, through you, and around you.

Amen.

Music for the Journey

Let us dance...

Bill Withers - Lovely Day (Official Audio)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEeaS6fuUoA>