

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.

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.
I'm still in South Texas familia coming to you from the Border of Brownsville and Matamoros Mexico.
I welcome your prayers during this transition south I'm hoping this will be the last week of construction work.
I pray that wherever you are, you are safe, warm and blessed.

Today's the first of the month
So real quick—go ahead and grab some bread and some juice,
whatever you've got. Keep it close,
because right before our prayers we're going
to bless the elements and take Holy Communion together.
Also today is going to feel a little different—in a good way.

I'm going to be guiding our time with a book by Diana Butler Bass called A Beautiful Yea: 52 Meditations on Faith, Wisdom, and Perseverance.
And we're also going to weave music throughout—on purpose.

I want you to listen with your whole self, and when a line or part of our reading touches you, or when a melody opens something up in you... don't rush past it.

Sit with it.
Let it speak.
If you can, grab some paper too—something to write on, doodle on, draw on.
No pressure to be “artistic.”

Just give your spirit a way to respond.
If something inspires you, if something connects you to the sacred... write it down.
Sketch it out.
Let it be an offering, an action item that moves your faith forward.

In the weeks to come I will place in our Youtube channel music we listen here at SL
so you can have it any time you want to get your Holy Spirit Vibe on.

I will do the same later on with a Twitch and Discord Channel.
The goal is to have everything up and running before Lent (my favorite season), so
we can move into those practices together as we walk toward Resurrection Sunday.

INVOCATION -

Come Holy spirit, tune our hearts.
Make us sensitive to the quiet warnings,
the sacred nudges, the dreams and convictions
You place within us.
And when imperial forces demand our silence,
our loyalty, our participation
—give us courage to choose another way.

The way of Christ.
The way of mercy.
The way of truth.

Lord, like the Magi, teach us to move with purpose—not just away from danger, but
toward protection.
Toward solidarity.
Toward sustaining those who are more vulnerable.
Make us a people who refuse to look away.

A community that shelters, advocates, shares, and shows up.
Give us eyes to see the threatened, ears to hear the cries, and hands ready to build
a safer world in Your name.
In the name of Jesus—born under empire, threatened by empire.
Amen

First Part - “Imperial Treachery”

The Statue of Liberty in New York City has a plaque that is called The New Colossus.

The poem, added in 1903, redefined the statue as a symbol of hope for immigrants,
while the tablet represents the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the rule of

law.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch,
whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning,
and her name
Mother of Exiles.

From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips.

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Emma Lazarus
November 2, 1883

Travelers will come to see this symbol as a welcoming torch lighting the way home.
Such was the story of our savior, Jesus Christ and the Wise Man.

Having left home, comfort, and safety- a pregnant Mary and husband Joseph travel
approximately 80- 90 miles from their home.
The Roman government required them to register in their ancestral town.

On Matthew 2:12 it says "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they left for their own country by another road. -MATTHEW 2:12

Oh Dreamer - The Brilliance feat. Diana Gamos
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=079lZkaeLXw>

Our reading today comes from the book of Gospel Matthew 2:1-12 and 16-18 (The
Message)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod's
kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East.

They asked around, "Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the
Jews?"

We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth.
We're on pilgrimage to worship him."

When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

They told him, “Bethlehem, Judah territory.
The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:
It’s you, Bethlehem, in Judah’s land,
no longer bringing up the rear.

From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel.”

Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared.

Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned.

As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.” instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child.

They could hardly contain themselves:
They were in the right place!
They had arrived at the right time!

They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him.

Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh. In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod.

So they worked out another route,
left the territory without being seen,
and returned to their own country.

Herod, when he realized that the scholars had tricked him, flew into a rage. He commanded the murder of every little boy two years old and under who lived in Bethlehem and its surrounding hills.
(He determined that age from information he’d gotten from the scholars.

That’s when Jeremiah’s revelation was fulfilled:

A sound was heard in Rama,
weeping and much lament.
Rachel weeping for her children,
Rachel refusing all solace,

Her children gone,
 dead and buried.
The Word of God for the people of God

Diana Butler Bass on her chapter Imperial Treachery talks about "The story of the Wise Men is the hinge between Christmas and Epiphany.

At the end of the twelve days of Christmas, this stark story warns that the birth of peace and justice will be intertwined with imperial treachery and violence.

When Jesus was born, angels proclaimed peace on earth, and shepherds traveled to the manger to witness the miracle.

Salvation has come for all people!

And Epiphany, the season that begins with the story of the journey of the Wise Men, reveals light shimmering through a dark night.

The tale is also an homage to mystics who follow the stars seeking peace and enlightenment, a way that ends with joy.

Yet it is also a story about a calculating and cruel despot who could not abide a challenge to his power.

He lied without restraint, manipulated religion for his own ends, and murdered anyone who dared question his right to rule.

The entire story from Matthew 2:1-12, 16 reads: In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Wise Men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

Herod was not a popular king.
He was brutal and hated, a puppet ruler of Rome who literally bribed Mark Antony to put him on the throne.

He was so fearful, so desperate to maintain his wealth and power, that he felt threatened by three wandering astrologers who believed in a prophecy about a baby born to be the true king of Israel.

That king would not be Herod, nor any heir of his lineage.

Thus, Herod did as he always did—he'd already killed his brother-in-law, his wife's grandfather, his wife, her mother, and two of his own sons—he plotted murder. He hatched a scheme to get rid of the pretender child.

He invited the visitors from the east to his palace as guests.
He listened to their tale of the star and offered them safe passage through the kingdom.

Posing as a man of faith, he tried to trick them into revealing where this future ruler lived: "When you have found him, bring me word so I may also go and pay him homage."

The Magi did indeed find the child; they were overcome with joy and worshiped him. But they were also warned in a dream not to go back to Herod.

They went home by another road. Herod learned of their defiance—and how they had deceived him. He could not bear being outsmarted by three spiritual seekers—he was infuriated—and unable to carry out his original plan to kill the infant rival.

What did he do instead?

He sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the Wise Men.

Herod killed "all the children in and around Bethlehem" because he was enraged about the birth of another king—who threatened his power. Furious to the point of murdering babies.

The Christmas story ends as a tragedy. It began with the announcement of the birth of a single, special child; it concludes with the murder of many.

A megalomaniacal authoritarian despot butchered the weakest members of society.

Jesus's family fled to Egypt as refugees.

The Magi escaped by a different route.
The bodies of babies lay dead in the streets.
The angel song drowned out by Rachel's weeping."

So what do we do with this grief?

What do we do when it is too much to hold?
You do art.

You write a song like Bruce Springsteen did

Bruce Springsteen - Streets Of Minneapolis (Official Lyric Video)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDaPdpwA4Iw>

The promise of Christmas does not come easily.
Peace on earth terrifies and threatens those who have prospered under the old order.

Corrupt kings will lie and murder—do anything—to stop the possibility of God's dream made manifest in the world.

Herod was one more such tyrant in the brutal history of tyrants.
When it comes to human governments, there will be good rulers and there will be mediocre ones.

But there will be oppressors and despots aplenty—even after the Prince of Peace is born.

Another Herod always awaits, standing at the ready, evil intentions primed to execution.

What do we do when Herod is on the throne?

Be like the Magi, those ancient Wise Men.
Do not obey in advance.
Discern deceit; trust the truth.
Be brave.

Following a star means moving at night.
Sometimes the night will be very dark indeed.

Keep on the journey; trust the way.
The star will stop.

We can kneel, worship, choose joy.
Even when Herod enacts his evil schemes, God is with us.
Love is here, born into the world.

Offer your gifts.
Travel light.
Give thanks.
Pay attention to your dreams.
And, whatever you do, take another road home."

Kingdom Muzic Presents Antwoine Hill - Lift His Name Up
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCSCcawRno0&list=RDFCSCcawRno0&start_radio=1

Communion -

Lifting Jesus name - Reminding ourselves that the gospels are still alive telling us to keep moving forward with the message of hope.

Epiphany invites us to keep sharing our light, our talents, our lives.

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.

Because regardless of what is going out in the world the table this table keeps remaining us why and how we keep living.

Some at the front lines.
Some preparing the bread and the meal.

Each communion, let it remind you of very life of the one who call us who did his ministry through the Roman empire still saying God is good, we are more than victorious.

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

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.

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.

Jon Reddick - No Fear (Official Music Video)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYtUec8mzak&list=RDEMTcGYt3IUzA976ex0A4B3EQ&start_radio=1&rv=GYtUec8mzak

Go in Peace