

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.

We are in the season of Lent.
And as a reminder we are gathering on Mondays and Friday
mornings at the Peace Grove Circle where
we are reading and reflecting on the book based on Kat Armas book "Sacred Belonging"
a 40 day devotional on the liberating heart of scriptures.

Today is also the first Sunday of the month and we will be partaking in Holy
Communion.

So real quick—go ahead and grab some bread and some juice,
whatever you've got. Keep it close,
because right after our Sermon we're going
to bless the elements and take Holy Communion together.

Now I invite you to take a breath and release it slowly.

Wherever you are coming from today—whether your week felt steady or overwhelming,
hopeful or heavy – you are welcome here.

Lent has a way of slowing us down.
It invites us to look inward, to examine what shapes us,
what forms our perspective,
what stories we have been telling ourselves about God,
about the world, and about one another.

Today we sit with a Gospel where someone comes to Jesus at night – not in certainty,
but in questions.

Not in clarity, but in curiosity.
And perhaps that is where many of us find ourselves too.
So let us lean in together – not with fear, not with defensiveness – but with
openness to what the Spirit might reveal when we allow ourselves to see differently.
Let us listen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION Matt. 6:1-6

O God, you see our secret hearts.
You see through our vain attempts at righteousness,
when we do the right thing for the wrong reason.

Forgive us when we seek to please others,
instead of pleasing you.

Do not see us for our faults, and do not go away from us.
Keep us always in your presence so that we may be restored to the joy of your
salvation.

Sustain in us a willing spirit to treasure what you desire both secret and public,
the door to God's heart is open, and we enter into grace and mercy. then our hearts
will be opened in joy and gladness.

In Jesus Christ name we pray.
Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

Friends, our God who sees all our hidden parts also cleanses every part.
Trust in God's forgiveness that you may serve with pure hearts in Christ's name.
Amen.

Gathering Song -

Hulvey, Forrest Frank - Altar (Official Music Video)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lyb3mDBEW0&list=RD5lyb3mDBEW0&start_radio=1

Our reading today comes from the Gospel of John 3:1-15 NRSRV

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.
He came to Jesus by night and said to him,

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.”

Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”
Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”

Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony.

If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

The Word of God for the people of God

Thanks be to God

SERMON - Beyond Fear: Walking into the Light of Lent

Today’s Gospel, John 3:1-15, introduces us to Nicodemus – a Pharisee, a religious leader, a man formed and educated in the faith.

Scripture tells us:

“Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus... He came to Jesus by night.” (John 3:1-2)
And I often wonder – after that conversation, did his perspective change?

Growing up, I didn't know my family and I were poor.
Compared to the children we ministered to across the border in Matamoros Mexico,
we were well off.

We had twin beds my father built from wood.
We had blankets and clothes my mother sewed.

We had frijoles, rice, tortillas.
A tortilla with salt or avocado was delicious.

The children we served slept on cardboard,
dirt floors, pallets – sometimes tents.

It wasn't until I moved to the Dallas area that I realized tents were something
people bought for recreation.

People actually paid money to sleep outside.
Perspective shapes reality.

Some people would hear that we ate beans and rice and assume I was malnourished.
But I wasn't.

Perspective shaped what I saw as normal, what I called "blessed," and what I
believed was enough.

Perspective – whether bleak or bright – shapes how we see the world.
It shapes what we believe is normal.
It shapes what we accept.
It shapes which narratives we buy into.

Nicodemus had perspective too.
He saw something in Jesus that did not fit neatly into the script he knew... and yet
it intrigued him.
Yet he came at night– not out of ignorance alone, but out of fear.

The scriptures does not say this but perhaps it was the fear of...judgment.

Fear of losing status.
Fear of discomfort.

Would it have been perhaps the concern about being seen with a controversial
teacher?

And when Nicodemus comes he says to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher
who has come from God; for no one can do these signs apart from the presence of
God." (John 3:2)

In other words: I see what you are doing.
I cannot deny it.

But he still comes at night.

Jesus tells Nicodemus:

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” (John 3:3)

No slogans.

No comfortable narratives.

No easy answers.

Jesus was inviting transformation – a shift in perspective.

Jesus then reminds Nicodemus of a story from Numbers 21.

When the people were bitten by snakes in the wilderness, Moses lifted up a bronze serpent, and those who looked upon it lived.

Jesus says, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” (John 3:14)

Before the Rod of Asclepius became associated with healing, Moses had already lifted a serpent as a sign of healing.

Symbols matter.

Jesus points Nicodemus to the story of Moses lifting the bronze serpent in the wilderness, saying, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...” (John 3:14).

Symbols matter because they call us to see differently, to look beyond our assumptions, to recognize those who suffer as neighbors, not threats.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus:

people needed something lifted up so they could see and believe.

Jesus was lifted up – not to glorify violence, but to reveal healing. A healing that had already been given.

So why, in every generation, do we return to fear?

Why do we cling to leaders or movements that promise safety at the expense of others?

Fear sells.

Hate sells.

The idea that something is being taken from you because of someone else’s existence sells.

Right now, in the state of Kansas, lawmakers have passed a law that invalidates driver's licenses and birth certificates of transgender people if those documents list a gender different from the sex assigned at birth.

In practice, that means people who have lived, worked, and identified as themselves now have their legal identity erased overnight – placing them at risk of discrimination, penalties, and violence simply for existing authentically.

The law also bans transgender people from using restrooms that match their gender identity in government buildings, creating real danger and legal penalties for ordinary daily needs.

Violence is not always physical. Sometimes it comes as legislation built on fear, fear of what we do not understand.

Nicodemus came at night – not because he was ignorant – but perhaps because he was afraid of what being seen might cost him.

Today many come at night to issues like this – not to understand, but to avoid seeing the humanity at stake.

But Lent calls us to see. Being born from above is not about buying into a narrative that makes us comfortable.

It is about allowing the Spirit to disturb us. Jesus says, “The wind blows where it chooses...You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” (John 3:8)

You cannot see the wind, but you feel it. You cannot see breath, but you live by it.

Lent invites us into that kind of seeing – into a rebirth of perception.

While the world feels unstable...
While vulnerable communities fear for their safety...
While policies and rhetoric threaten dignity...

It is easy to say, “We are fine.”
It is easy to stay in the night.
But being born from above refuses detachment.

Later in John’s Gospel, after the crucifixion, it is Nicodemus who brings spices to prepare Jesus’ body (John 19:39).

The one who came at night shows up publicly.
Perspective shifted into action.

So here is the invitation this Lent:
Move from night into light.

If fear is being sold, refuse to buy it.

If hate is being amplified, do not echo it.

If someone is being pushed from the table, pull up a chair.

Ask yourself:

Where have I grown numb?

Who is suffering that I have trained myself not to see?

What is mine to do?

Maybe it is speaking when silence feels safer.

Maybe it is listening before reacting.

Maybe it is protecting someone whose dignity is under attack.

Maybe it is using your resources for someone else's stability.
Jesus says, "For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16).

Not parts of it.

Not the convenient parts.

The world.

And if we follow the One who was lifted up for healing, then we must become people who lift up healing.

This Lent, do not settle for feeling spiritual.

Be transformed.

Taste the bread of life.

Drink the wine of community.

And then notice who is not at the table –
who has been excluded, shamed, dismissed.

Receive radical hospitality here.
Then go create it out there.

Pray for those in Kansas whose identities and legal protections are under attack.

Support organizations working to defend civil rights –
not because they are "liberal" or "conservative," but because they are people made
in the image of God.

Being born from above means asking ourselves:
Where have I stayed in the night when the Spirit is calling me into the light?

Church, may we move from night into light.

May we truly be born from above.
May our perspective widen until it looks like the kingdom of God.

In the name of the One lifted up for healing –
May it be so.

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

And now we shift towards another form of communion.
One 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.

Andra Day - Rise Up [Official Music Video] [Inspiration Version]
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwgr_IMeEgA

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,
Give us eyes to see with truth,
hearts to love without fear,
and courage to act in compassion.
May we move from night into light,
born from above not in fear,
but in love that sees every neighbor as sacred.
And may we rise up through faith and the joy of your Holy Name.

Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Step into the light, see with new eyes, walk boldly with courage, and let love and compassion outshine fear in every word, every step, and every action.”

Go in Peace
Amen

Music for the Journey

Perspective - What do you think when you hear the song this little light of mine?

Wait till you hear this take on this classic song.

Best Choir Group 'This Little Light Of Mine' Audition
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7v6H0t1bLm0>