

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 Palm Sunday

So I invite you to take a palm branch

from the red bulletin holder in the back and wear it.

Of course, while you're there you can also get a bulletin for tonight's service.

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.

“We Are One in the Spirit” Beyond the Walls Choir

https://youtu.be/bL5bT_Ezeq8?si=UvEfAoFUoUPSxdib

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 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 liturgical calendar says that today is Pentecost.

I don't remember hearing anything about Pentecost in Sunday School when I was growing up.

I had no awareness of it at all.

So when I returned to church as an adult, after many years away, and looked at a worship bulletin and it said,

"Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost,"

I had no idea what that meant.

Even in the church, when we've acknowledged it at all, we've tried to keep the "pentecost" to just one day on the calendar;

an event that happened a long time ago, the birthday of the church.

Oh, we may celebrate it every year

throw a birthday party

but we don't let it challenge us today.

The traditional story for Pentecost comes from the book of Acts of the Apostles.

To set the scene, it is after the resurrection,

and the disciples have returned to Jerusalem following the directions of the Risen Christ to wait there to,

as he promised, be "baptized with the Holy Spirit."

"Pentecost" literally means "50th day" and is the Greek word for the Jewish festival also called the "Feast of Weeks."

It is the third of the three great festivals, in Hebrew Shavoo-aht.

This is a joyful festival in which the first fruits of the harvest are given to God.

But it also commemorates the giving of the Torah, particularly the 10 commandments, on Mount Sinai, after the exodus of the Jews from Egypt.

Scholars believe that the author of Acts, traditionally thought to be Luke, was making a deliberate parallel between God's revelation of the Torah,

which signaled the birth of the Jews as chosen people of God,

and the story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit,

which signaled the birth of the church.

As we listen to the story, there are a couple of things I'd like to point out.

You will hear how "they were all together in one place."

This is sometimes thought of as only the inner circle, the original few disciples.

But scholars point out this may be more likely to be the entire community of Jesus' followers,

which according to the last chapter of Acts, numbered about 120 men and women at that time.

Second, the crowd that witnesses this event were not just pilgrims in town for the festival.

The text says there were "Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem."

These were immigrants, who had emigrated from around the Roman empire.

Let us listen to the story of what happened that first Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

from Acts, chapter 2, verses 1 through 13.

ACTS 2:1-13 (NRSVne)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,

and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem.

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

Amazed and astonished, they asked,

“Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?

And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,

Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene,

and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,

Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another,

“What does this mean?”

But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

“Back to Babel”

Let us pray . . .

When I was first told the story of Pentecost,

I was told that it was the flip side of the story of the Tower of Babel, back in the book of Genesis.

You know, where the people worked together to build a tower to touch the heavens, the task made easier by the fact that they all spoke a common language.

God destroyed the tower, scattered the people, and gave them different languages so they could not understand one another.

Babel, I was taught, is a story of human arrogance, thinking we could be like God.

But with the coming of Jesus, we can now all be one in Christ through the Holy Spirit,

so we can all be the same again.

Through the Holy Spirit all could be understood, all languages becoming as one.

That was before I actually read the stories in the books of Acts and Genesis.

As I read those stories, that’s not exactly what happened.

First, about Babel,

Cuban-American theologian Kat Armas notes that what arrogant humans were trying to do was consolidate power,

to “make a name” for themselves.

She writes, “they weren’t just building a tower to get to God;

they were building an empire so they could act as one. . . .

Their desire was to become a civilization that would dominate others.”

They took pride in their single language, in their sameness.

God recognized that the tower would be only the beginning, so God intervened,

not to punish but to disrupt their project of domination, of oppressive conformity.

Armas writes, "God creates diversity where there was uniformity, scattering them with new languages, new cultures, and a plethora of voices. They wanted control, but God imposed chaos—a kind of holy chaos that prevents the concentration of power." The spirit of God disrupted the plans for oppressive conformity, to create diversity.

We see that diversity not only in human communities, but in all of nature, where bio-diversity is essential to the flourishing of our planet. A diversity, by the way, that God brags about when speaking out of a whirlwind in the book of Job. A whirlwind – it doesn't get more chaotic than that as an image for the work of the Divine.

But what about Pentecost?

Well, first, the wind is back, violently rushing through the house. Then there are tongues of fire resting on each person and a cacophony of sound. Chaos indeed.

It doesn't sound to me like it is the opposite of Babel, but a return to it. Remember that at the time, Jerusalem was ruled by the Roman Empire.

Latin was the official language of the Roman Empire, but Greek was the common language most people understood – a holdover from the previous empire.

Greek was the language of commerce and the Roman military for much of the early Roman empire.

But all the pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem for the festival, and all the immigrant Jews from around the Empire,

would also have spoken the native language of the land of their birth.

And those native languages were what they heard when Jesus's Galilean followers spoke.

The Spirit didn't work so that everyone spoke the same language, like they did in Babel before the tower fell.

The Spirit allowed each person to hear their own native language.

Not only that, the followers of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, were able to speak in different languages.

This was a direct challenge to Roman imperial order and control.

This wasn't the uniformity of empire, it was the chaos of diversity.

It was a scene full of energy and confusion and wonder, "how can it be?"

Armas writes, "The divine Spirit doesn't arrive in the tidy ways empire wants, with its thirst for predictability and properness.

No, the Spirit comes in the chaos that leaves us wide-eyes, amazed, and mystified. . . .

It wasn't just the fire or the wind that left the people in awe but the familiar sound of their own languages echoing through the heart of an empire that had long sought to strip them of such things."

Where the forces of domination and empire demand assimilation and control, the Spirit of God brings diversity and liberation.

Armas again: "The Spirit of God does not ask us to contort ourselves into something

we are not.

There is no demand for assimilation, no hierarchy of languages or cultures. No single race, class, or status holds dominance in the kingdom of God. Instead the Spirit invites us to be the fullest expression of who we are, in all our particularity, in all our strangeness and beauty.”

That long ago Pentecost day, the Spirit brought not uniformity, but understanding. And through understanding, a oneness in Spirit. A unity not despite diversity, but through it.

A oneness in the Spirit, unity in love, not because all are the same but because the same Spirit dwells within each of us.

It's like a choir, a multitude of voices, each singing their own part.

The sopranos and the tenors, the altos and the basses.

The notes they sing may be different, and even the words, but when they sing together the result is beautiful.

Magical even.

Unity in diversity.

At church we used to enact this every Sunday, as we sang together as a congregation.

But now, except for the small minority who are in the choir, most in the congregation sing only the melody, not harmony.

Congregational singing is a lost art,

and with it that communal experience of singing our own song interwoven with the songs of others.

We live in another time when the forces of domination, of empire, seek oppressive conformity in order to control.

One song, one melody.

In the United States, diversity is not just a dirty word in these times but is considered dangerous and anti-American.

So ironic for a country that, like the Jerusalem of Jesus's day, has been for all of its history

a meeting place for immigrants (voluntary and involuntary) from all over the world. Immigrants who have brought not only their own languages and customs, but religions as well,

even as they suppressed the voices and customs of the native peoples already here.

The power of our government in the United States is trying to rewrite history and erase diversity in all its forms:

diversity of voices, of opinions, of culture, of skin color, of country of origin, of religion, of gender, of sexual orientation.

And if those forces succeed in remaking the United States in their own image— that is white, European, fundamentalist Christian, male-- they will not stop there.

Indeed, that project has already begun.

Look at Venezuela. Iran.

Empire is never satisfied.

But the stories of Babel and Pentecost teach that empire— whether Roman, or American, or Christian—

will not have the last word.

The Spirit of God calls forth “the richness of every tongue, every story, every

people.”

The multitude of voices will always rise,
we’ve seen it in the streets of America,
and things will get a lot more chaotic before this period in history is over.
Because that’s how God works.

God will be in the midst of that holy chaos disrupting the imperial project
and empowering resistance and resilience, making a way where there seems no way,
making space for diversity and understanding and common cause,
lifting up the voices and hearts that the forces of domination, oppression, empire,
could never quite silence.

I hope that some of those voices will be ours,
voices raised in love and solidarity.

We may be back in Babel before the tower fell,
but fall it will.

We’ve been here before.

Remember what happened back in Babel.

Remember what happened on that first day of Pentecost.

We don’t know exactly how, or when,
but we know how this story ends.

And it doesn’t end well for empire.

Let those with ears to hear listen!

Amen.

“One Voice” The Wallin’ Jennys

<https://youtu.be/-jKH6kILbho?si=TOEcIX45r1bwuj7s>

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.

PASTORAL PRAYER

(adapted from Kat Armas)

Sacred One,
Known by many names,
Experienced in many ways,
We hear you in every language, every dialect, every sound that stirs the heart and
shakes the earth.
At Babel, you shattered the walls of a single tongue, and in that shattering we
found our freedom.
We confess the times we've sought comfort in sameness, when we've turned away from
the beauty of difference.
We embrace your mercy so that we may walk in wholeness.
Open our ears to the voices we have ignored,
open our hearts to the beauty we have feared.
Open our own throats that we may join in the songs of hope, of love, of liberation
being sung in our land and around the world.
We pray in the name of the Lover, the Beloved, and Love Itself. Amen.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY
(adapted from Kat Armas)

And now,
Our worship is over,
but our ministry to the world is just beginning.
The world is waiting
May our traditions breathe in the spaces we inhabit,
a living testament to all that our ancestors dreamed and endured.
May we walk with courage, embracing the richness of every voice
and the radiance of difference.
May we know we are held in a love that has no borders,
a love that calls us into the fullness of who we were meant to be.
Go in peace, come again in hope.
Amen.

“Resilient” Rising Appalachia
<https://youtu.be/tx17RvPMaQ8?si=hgmxeRlRIH9v1sqk>

GO IN PEACE!