

March 14, 2021

Fourth Sunday in Lent



St. John United Church of Christ

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Prayers and Liturgy
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“So Loved”

Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Beloved in Christ, why have you come to worship this morning?

**We come to celebrate the love of God
in the form of Jesus Christ.**

This love reaches through the shadows of our lives to embrace us. Our challenge is to trust the light of God's love in the midst of our struggles.

**We come to celebrate the light of God in Jesus who
offers love and acceptance,
not judgment and rejection.**

If only we will trust, Jesus leads us in the way of light and love.

**We come to celebrate our God
who loved and loves us so much!**

PRAYER OF RECONCILIATION:

O God of Comfort and God of Challenge,
we come to you this morning the way the Israelites did,
full of complaints and dissatisfaction.
Nothing is enough; we do not recognize your blessing at
work in our day to day lives.

Forgive us.

In our complaints, challenge us as you did the

Israelites,

to consider the bigger picture

of oppression, injustice, and inequality around us.

Forgive us when we close our eyes

for fear of what you might show us;

Lift up loving and compassionate leaders

to open our eyes until we see what you see in our world.

ASSURANCE OF BLESSING

You are blessed because God's image resides deep within each of you.

So return God's blessing by the way you love others.

SCRIPTURE: Numbers 21:4b-9

"The people became impatient on the road. ⁵The people spoke against God and Moses: "Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill us in the desert, where there is no food or water. And we detest this miserable bread!" ⁶So the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people and they bit the people. Many of the Israelites died.

⁷The people went to Moses and said, "We've sinned, for we spoke against the LORD and you. Pray to

the LORD so that he will send the snakes away from us."

So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸The LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Whoever is bitten can look at it and live." ⁹Moses made a bronze snake and placed it on a pole. If a snake bit someone, that person could look at the bronze snake and live.

Ephesians 2:1-10

2 At one time you were like a dead person because of the things you did wrong and your offenses against God. **2** You used to live like people of this world. You followed the rule of a destructive spiritual power. This is the spirit of disobedience to God's will that is now at work in persons whose lives are characterized by disobedience. **3** At one time you were like those persons. All of you used to do whatever felt good and whatever you thought you wanted so that you were children headed for punishment just like everyone else. **4-5** However, God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace! **6** And God raised us up and seated us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. **7** God did this to show future generations the greatness of his grace by the goodness that God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

⁸You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. ⁹It's not something you did that you can be proud of. ¹⁰Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.

GOSPEL: John 3:14-21

¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up ¹⁵so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. ¹⁶God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. ¹⁷God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son.

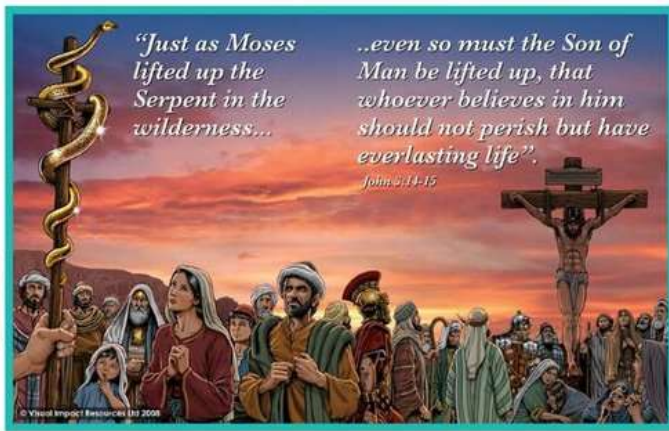
¹⁹"This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. ²⁰All who do wicked things hate the light and don't come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. ²¹Whoever does the truth comes to the light so

that it can be seen that their actions were done in God."

MESSAGE: "RSVP to God's Invitation"

All three readings which you just read can be summarized by two words: judgment and grace. It's not unusual to think of judgment and grace as two separate actions of God. Some texts speak of God's repeated acts of grace, when rebuffed or denied, being followed by acts of judgment. Other texts speak of God's judgment upon the people and then of God's turning toward them in favor and grace. However, in our Gospel for this morning one act of God is spoken of as being both judgment and grace; that act is God's sending Christ into the world.

The First Testament story concerning the Hebrew people complaining that Moses had brought them out of Egypt to die. The people were sinning by not trusting God. God's judgment was poisonous serpents that would bite them and they would die. But God told Moses to build a bronze serpent and elevate it on a pole. All who looked up at this serpent, would live. It's as if Christ was being lifted up for the life of all who looked to him in faith.



Of course, this action has a double meaning; it refers to the manner of Jesus' death and also to Christ's exaltation to the presence of God. Both the John text and the text from Numbers are accounts of God's grace, God's initiative for the salvation of the people.

Notice that God took the initiative; you might say that God was giving an invitation to be saved.

The second part of the John text is a theological reflection upon the meaning of Christ coming into the world. The governing image in the passage is light. ("You are the light of the world.") No one has ever seen God, but the only Son has made God known (verse 1:18) and to know God is life eternal. Look up to the bronze serpent and you will have life.

Christ did not come to judge, but his coming is a judgment in the same way that turning on a light can be the exposure and conviction of those who prefer

darkness because their deeds are evil (verse 20). At the same time, the light is for others a gift and the occasion for joy.

The question is do we want the light on? Are we threatened by the light; by meeting Jesus? Will Jesus catch us with our hands in the cookie jar? If we stood before Jesus, what would we see in his face; consternation or love? Would we know the grace Jesus has for us? Which would we choose? Would we invite Jesus in or would we run back into the darkness? Notice that Jesus is at the door knocking but the door knob is on our side of the door.

Would we rather turn away from judgment because that's much easier? Maybe we don't want to be confronted by our own character flaws, our sins.

How about a twist on the ever popular John 3:16. "God was so disgusted by the world that God sent God's only begotten son back to the safety of God's heavenly throne, because no one wanted this son around, so humans perished instead of finding grace and a life of love."

What will your RSVP be? Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today 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 kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.



INVITATION TO SHARE:

Consider the steadfast love of God in every breath you breathe. May that steadfast love inspire you to give generously.

so that we may live into God's Reign of peace and compassion
through the offerings of our own church.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION:

O Generous One, we give thanks to you
for your steadfast love endures forever.

May these gifts be used to feed the hunger and satisfy
the thirst

Of all those you love throughout your creation. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Let us rejoice: God so loves the world!

May God your Maker send you back into the world with
creative energies refreshed.

May Christ the Light illuminate your fearful moments.

And may the Holy Spirit of steadfast love
guide you until we worship together again.

This day and forevermore. Amen!

**PRAYER LIST: We pray for the health and well-being of
all affected by the pandemic and we especially pray
for: Urban Baum, Donna Isselhard, Becky Ballard, P.J.
Bennett, Nelson Libell, Joe Knapp.**