

March 14th, 2021 Fourth Sunday in Lent

Welcome and announcements.

Welcome to worship. Next week in person worship is offered and we will celebrate Palm Sunday a week early.

We share Holy Communion today so you may desire to gather a piece of bread or cracker, wine, juice or water to receive the sacrament.

Please join me this Wednesday on-line for the Lenten series “Created for Community”. This week’s theme is “In community with those on the margins.”

Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity, ✙ one God, the keeper of the covenant, the source of steadfast love, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

God hears us when we cry and draws us close in Jesus Christ. Let us return to the one who is full of compassion. **Silence is kept for reflection.** Fountain of living water pour out your mercy over us. Our sin is heavy, and we long to be free. Rebuild what we have ruined and mend what we have torn. Wash us in your cleansing flood. Make us alive in the Spirit to follow in the way of Jesus, as healers and restorers of the world you so love. Amen.

Beloved, God’s word never fails. The promise rests on grace: by the saving love of Jesus Christ, the wisdom and power of God, your sins are ✙ forgiven, and God remembers them no more. Journey in the way of Jesus. Amen.

Prayer of the Day

O God, rich in mercy, by the humiliation of your Son you lifted up this fallen world and rescued us from the hopelessness of death. Lead us into your light, that all our deeds may reflect your love, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Reading: Numbers 21:4-9

Though God provides food and water for the Israelites in the wilderness, they whine and grumble. They forget about the salvation they experienced in the exodus. God punishes them for their sin, but when they repent God also provides a means of healing: a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole.

⁴From Mount Hor [the Israelites] set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” ⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents

among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

¹Give thanks to the LORD, for the LORD is good, for God’s mercy endures forever.

²**Let the redeemed of the LORD proclaim that God redeemed them from the hand of the foe,**

³gathering them in from the lands; from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

¹⁷**Some were fools and took rebellious paths; through their sins they were afflicted.**

¹⁸They loathed all manner of food and drew near to death’s door.

¹⁹**Then in their trouble they cried to the LORD and you delivered them from their distress.**

²⁰You sent forth your word and healed them and rescued them from the grave.

²¹**Let them give thanks to you, LORD, for your steadfast love and your wonderful works for all people.**

²²Let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and tell of your deeds with shouts of joy.

Second Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

While we were dead in our sinfulness, God acted to make us alive as a gift of grace in Christ Jesus. We are saved not by what we do but by grace through faith. Thus our good works are really a reflection of God’s grace at work in our lives.

¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The Holy Gospel according to: John 3:14-21 Glory to you O Lord

To explain the salvation of God to the religious leader, Nicodemus, Jesus refers to the scripture passage quoted in today's first reading. Just as those who looked upon the bronze serpent were healed, so people will be saved when they behold Christ lifted up on the cross.

[Jesus said:] ¹⁴“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” The word of the Lord.....**Praise to you O Christ**

Sermon

John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.*” This is a verse that some students memorize, and all adult Christians can quote as a simple faith statement. It seems simple enough and is also an idealistic view of God. That God gave Jesus to the human world to save it by sacrificing his body to save people who believe in him. I do not think that John meant it to be that simple. What about evil? Evil is still with us. What about the need to help others and confess our sins? It would seem that if the passage is the whole truth as is printed on T-shirts and billboards, that there would be no need to study and follow anything else God expects from us and Jesus teaches us. There would be no need to pray for the Holy Spirit to lead us. What are we being saved from? What is this eternal life? These are just of the few questions we ask in a bible study and even with confirmation students of inquiring minds.

Other questions about John's gospel may include: What does believing in Jesus mean?" Why did Jesus need to come into the world? Was it because of sin? If Jesus came to the world to save it from sin, what kind of sin? For John, sin seems to be the existing flaws of humanity including injustice, hate, lack of mercy, and so on. John does not lead us to a personal relationship, an individual commitment to Jesus.

To better understand what John wants us to know about Christ Jesus is included in all seven verses not only John 3:16 no matter how many buildings we see it printed on.

¹⁹*Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.* ²⁰*Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that*

their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ *But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.”*

It is a dangerous trap to read John 3:16 alone. We might get the impression that God so loves the world that he sends his child to save it or to “fix” it. When we read the whole passage, we understand that to save, fix or change the world requires a process of ending hate, injustice, and oppression. We are called to replace those sins with justice, compassion, mercy, love, equality and so on. John continues to point out that some people will choose the darkness, reject Jesus, and embrace sin. John calls us to join Jesus in the light, come to the light, be the light for change or restoration of God’s people to a life without the bondage of sin.

We can conclude that for John, believing in or accepting Jesus’ message has more to do with agreeing with His teachings than with a change of heart. The challenge posed by the coming of Jesus is that we are called to see who we are, what we stand for, and what exactly we believe. Do we advocate for justice, compassion, and mercy for all of God’s people or do we sin by looking away from it? In this pandemic year light has shined on people of color, women, Asian people, people with gender identity issues, immigrants, and the poor among us.

Jose Porfirio Miranda, the late great theologian from Mexico who taught in seminaries around the world said: *“From the time Christ demonstrated what a person can be, our dissatisfaction with what we are has become torturous.”* There are quite a few challenges in this reading of the text. The call for Christians to make decisions about the evils of hatred, exploitation, and oppression that surround us seem obvious in this passage. What can we do you ask? We can read about these issues. We can pray about these issues. We can listen to how we talk about other people. We can engage in Lutheran World Relief websites and advocate websites like Amparo.org an advocacy non-profit helping refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers. The word Amparo means refugee.

Can we really stay neutral when things are wrong around us? The teachings of Jesus say that being neutral is not being a follower of Christ. Being neutral is not Christian. Hating people of color, hating immigrants, hating people who are different is not following Jesus. When I saw the “Oath Keepers” and other radical groups ascend the steps of the Capitol building January 6th with Christian flags, and T-shirts with the name of Jesus on them it seemed obvious to me that they did not know the Jesus of scripture as they called out to murder governmental leaders.

John 3:16 is so familiar and reminds us we are loved by God through the divine Christ. The entire seven verses remind us that we are also judged by the divine Christ. As our Lenten journey continues this passage shines a light on the truth that believing in Jesus also means to follow his teachings. Jesus teaches us that we cannot be neutral in a world of people that suffer. As God has sent Jesus to give us grace and mercy, so Jesus sends us to give the same. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence. You sent your Son that the world might be saved through him. Inspire the witness of the church throughout the world. Empower missionaries, Bible translators, and ministries of service in your name. Bless our partners in ministry (*in Romania and Honduras*), our ELCA global partner churches, and Young Adults in Global Mission.

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

From east to west your steadfast love is shown. Nourish seas and deserts, wilderness areas and cities. Give water to thirsty lands; nurture spring growth that feeds hungry creatures; bless farmers as they prepare for the growing season.

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

You sustained your people in the wilderness. Give courage to all who lead in times of crisis and scarce resources. Prosper the work of those who aid victims of famine and drought (*especially Madagascar, Haiti, Mozambique, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Lesotho the enslaved country in South Africa, Afghanistan, and Nigeria*). Bring peace in places where scarce resources cause violence.

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Your mercy endures forever. Deliver all who cry to you, especially those who are hungry or without homes. Give life in places where death seems triumphant; give healing to those who are sick and comfort to those who mourn. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

By grace we have been saved. Fill this congregation to overflowing with that grace, that we show mercy to others. Nourish any in our midst who are hungry, especially children, and bless our ministries of feeding and shelter (*especially the Polo Food Pantry, the Dixon, Sterling and Rockford Shelters*). Give us patience and courage when the way seems long.

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Be with those in military service working for peace ***especially Logan, JJ, Bryan, Dustin, Brad and Travis***. Be with those who are sick or in distress ***especially Dawn Knapp and those fighting covid 19, Brad Shippert and those in treatment, those in care faculties that we know Sibyl, Tammy, Trudy, Jessica, Hazel, Jeanne, Linda, Ed and Marian***.

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Your Son was lifted up that whoever believes might have eternal life. We praise you for all who have died in Christ. Bring us with all the saints into the fullness of your promises.

Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Offering Prayer

Faithful God, you walk beside us in desert places, and you meet us in our hunger with bread from heaven.

Accompany us in this meal, that we may pass over from death to life with Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Gathered into one by the power of the Holy Spirit we pray

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation.

but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Invitation to Communion

Jesus draws the whole world to himself. Come to this meal and be fed.

Holy Communion Together

It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God, through our Savior Jesus Christ. You call your people to cleanse their hearts and prepare with joy for the paschal feast, that, renewed in the gift of baptism, we may come to the fullness of your grace.

In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take and eat; this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.

For as often as we eat of this bread and drink from this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Take your bread/cracker	The body of Christ given for you
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Take you juice/wine/water	The blood of Christ shed for you
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The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen you and keep you in His grace.

Prayer after Communion

God of steadfast love, at this table you gather your people into one body for the sake of the world. Send us in the power of your Spirit, that our lives bear witness to the love that has made us new in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Blessing You are what God made you to be: created in Christ Jesus for good works, chosen as holy and beloved, freed to serve your neighbor. God bless you ☩ that you may be a blessing, in the name of the holy and life-giving Trinity. Amen.

Dismissal

Go in peace. Share the good news.

Thanks be to God.