



St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church  
 Wilton, WI  
 Fourth Sunday in Lent  
 March 14, 2021  
**Inviting People to  
 Journey with Christ's Family  
 in Spreading God's Love and Mercy**

*The fourth of the Old Testament promises providing a baptismal lens this Lent is the promise God makes to Moses: those who look on the bronze serpent will live. In today's gospel Jesus says he will be lifted up on the cross like the serpent, so that those who look to him in faith will live. When we receive the sign of the cross in baptism, that cross becomes the sign we can look to in faith for healing, for restored relationship to God, for hope when we are dying.*

### Come to Me, All Pilgrims Thirsty



- 1 "Come to me, all pil-grims thirst - y; drink the wa - ter I will give.
- 2 "Come to me, all trav-lers wea - ry; come that I may give you rest.
- 3 "Come to me, be - liev-ers bur-dened; find re - fresh-ment in this place.
- 4 "Come to me, re - pen-tant sin - ners; leave be - hind your guilt and shame.



If you knew what gift I of - fer, you would come to me and live."  
 Drink the cup of life I of - fer; at this ta - ble be my guest."  
 Come, re - ceive the gift I of - fer, turn to me and seek my face."  
 Come and know di - vine com - pas - sion, turn to me, I call your name."

*Refrain*



Jc - sus, ev - er - flow-ing foun - tain, give us wa - ter from your well.



In the gra - cious gift you of - fer there is joy no tongue can tell.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5 "Come to me, distressed and needy;<br/>           I would be your trusted friend.<br/>           Come and seek the gift I offer,<br/>           come, your open hands extend." <i>Refrain</i></li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6 "Come to me, abandoned, orphaned;<br/>           lonely ways no longer roam.<br/>           Come and take the gift I offer,<br/>           let me make in you my home." <i>Refrain</i></li> </ol> |
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## 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.**

## WORD

### FIRST READING

*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.*

### Numbers 21:4-9

<sup>4</sup>From 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. <sup>5</sup>The 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." <sup>6</sup>Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup>The 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. <sup>8</sup>And 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." <sup>9</sup>So 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.

### Psalms 107:1-3, 17-22

<sup>1</sup>Give thanks to the LORD, for the LORD is good,  
for God's mercy endures forever.  
<sup>2</sup>Let the redeemed of the LORD proclaim  
that God redeemed them from the hand of the foe,  
<sup>3</sup>gathering them in from the lands;  
from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.  
<sup>17</sup>Some were fools and took rebellious paths;  
through their sins they were afflicted.  
<sup>18</sup>They loathed all manner of food  
and drew near to death's door.  
<sup>19</sup>Then in their trouble they cried to the LORD  
and you delivered them from their distress.  
<sup>20</sup>You sent forth your word and healed them  
and rescued them from the grave.  
<sup>21</sup>Let them give thanks to you, LORD, for your steadfast love  
and your wonderful works for all people.  
<sup>22</sup>Let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving  
and tell of your deeds with shouts of joy.

## SECOND READING

*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*

### Ephesians 2:1-10

<sup>1</sup>You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in 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. <sup>3</sup>All 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. <sup>4</sup>But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—<sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

## HOLY GOSPEL

*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.*

### John 3:14-21

[Jesus said:] <sup>14</sup>"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>"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.

<sup>17</sup>"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. <sup>18</sup>Those 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. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But 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."

## SERMON

The first Bible verse that I learned as a young girl was, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but shall have eternal life" (John 3:16). It was my grandmother who taught me this verse. She was a wonderful Christian woman, and I was one of many children she taught about God and God's love.

My grandparents lived across the street from an elementary school. After school on certain days, the children would gather in my grandparents' yard, and my grandmother would share a Bible verse with them.

Anyone who came to learn the Bible verse received one of my grandmother's homemade cookies (which were delicious). That was my grandmother's way of sharing God's word with the school children. It was an example of her Christian witness.

John 3:16, is one of the most familiar verses in the Bible. It is the gospel message of salvation encapsulated into one verse. We see "John 3:16" on any number of items nowadays, including posters at football games and T.V. broadcasts for special events, and we wonder if it's message is being communicated to those who need to hear it. For those of us who know the verse, it is a reminder of God's love and God's gift of salvation. But for those who do not know Jesus, is it effective in spreading the good news? Do people who have never heard of John 3:16 seek out a Bible, or go to their computer, to look up its meaning? .

Thinking that some people would go online to find the meaning of John 3:16, I discovered the following on Wikipedia: a burger chain prints John 3:16 on the inside of the bottom rim of their paper cups, two clothing stores print it on the bottom of their shopping bags, and a fuel saver prints it on their boxes. Furthermore,

Heisman winning American football player Tim Tebow printed this reference (among other Bible verses) on his "Eye black" ...during the 2009 BCS National Championship Game." The verse, John 3:16, was the highest ranked Google search term over the next 24 hours generating 90 million searches. (Wikipedia for "John 3:16" and "Tim Tebow.")

From darkness to light. The children who were unfamiliar with God, who came to my grandparent's house after school, learned scripture verses. The people who went to their computers to look up John 3:16 as a result of Tim Tebow's actions, learned about God's love and God's gift of salvation. For some, this moved them from the unknown to the known; it moved them from walking in darkness to walking in the light of Jesus.

Our gospel passage for today is part of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee; a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. Nicodemus is a leader whom Jesus calls "a teacher of Israel" (John 3:10). Yet, Nicodemus is talking with Jesus and seeking to understand the journey to salvation. He is acknowledging that Jesus must be with God, for he could not do all that he has done otherwise, and Nicodemus wants to know what he must do to teach others about salvation. (We will hear more about Nicodemus' journey in the weeks of Lent to come.)

The reference to Moses lifting up "the serpent in the wilderness," is taken from our Old Testament passage. Moses was told by the Lord to "Make a poisonous serpent [of bronze, that is], and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." (Numbers 21:8) . This pole, which is lifted up by Moses is compared to Jesus who is to be lifted up during his resurrection and ascension. This pole, when viewed by someone who has been bitten by a serpent, by something evil, moves the person from death to life. This is compared to Jesus, who moves those who believe in him out of a life of darkness into a life of light; from eternal death to eternal life.

John 3:16 contains the promise from God that moves Christian believers from darkness to light, from eternal death to eternal life if they will only accept these words and place their trust in Jesus. It is a straight

forward message, and one that does not begin with God's wrath, but with God's love; God's love for this world, God's love for his only begotten son, and God's love for humanity. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." God sent his son to earth, to us, in love. God did not send his son first and foremost as a judge, but as a savior for humanity known as the Son of Man, a light for all, and especially, a light for all who live in darkness.

It is easy for us to pass judgment on others, but we are not to judge, only God is to judge. Life is not a game in which we say, "Yes, I am a sinner, but I am less of a sinner than you," as we point our finger to shame or blame someone else. This is not about judging or looking for the darkness in others; it is about looking for the light of Jesus Christ, and sharing the light of Jesus Christ. Judgment was not the reason why God sent his only begotten son to earth, but rather, to bring light to humanity, to help Nicodemus teach others how to move from a life of darkness to a life of light in Jesus; to move from death to eternal life.

Yes, we are all sinners who have fallen short of God's desires for us, but as Christian believers, we have the assurance that if we ask God for forgiveness, our sins will be forgiven. We will experience God's saving grace! So, the question is, will we as Christian believers help others to see the light of Jesus Christ? Will we acknowledge our love of Jesus Christ and attempt to bring others to know him?

The Serenity Prayer says it well, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." But, did you know that there is more to the prayer than this single sentence? It continues like this--"Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time, Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace. Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that God will make all things right, if I surrender to His will, that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with him forever in the next."

Yes, the shortened version of this prayer is easier to remember, but the content of the full prayer is very important. It speaks of this sinful world, of our need to trust in God, of our surrendering to God's will not our own, of our opportunity to be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy in the next. It speaks of moving from darkness to light; from death to eternal life with God.

Recently, my older brother sent me an article about a woman I know who works at Carroll University. The university held a virtual party to celebrate her 95th birthday! Yes, at 95-years of age, she is still working at the university food service. She has done so for 56-years, and plans to continue working once the university returns to regular food service operations.

I have known Gert for 30+ years, because she was at Carroll when I first started working there in 1990. One might wonder--why would someone continue working at age 95? Knowing Gert, I believe it is because she has the light of God inside her! Her kindness and warmth are felt by the students, faculty and staff whenever they are with her. For years, she would memorize names, so she could call people by their name as they went through the breakfast or lunch line. I believe that she sees her work not as a job, but as her ministry to others. Gert stated, "It's so much fun, (the) work isn't even work (and) thank you for letting me be a part of it" (Jake

Ekdahl, "Longtime Carroll employee celebrates her 95th birthday," *The Freeman*, Saturday, Jan. 30, 2021).

Gert is an ELCA Lutheran. She has a spiritual gift that shines brightly with the warmth of Jesus' unconditional love. This is what has kept her working for 95-years with no plans at the present time to stop. She conveys the message that God's light shines in us and through us. How many of us celebrate and thank God for work that allows us to spread joy, light and life to others?

As we continue walking with Jesus during these forty days of Lent, let us remember to follow the light of Jesus; asking forgiveness for our sins, refraining from judging those around us, and sharing John 3:16 and additional scripture passages with others. Let us help others to move out of their lives of darkness into lives of light, by walking in the light of God today and every day. Amen.

## **PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION**

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

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, ELCA World Hunger, Hunger Task Force, Wilton Food Pantry, Samaritan's Purse, 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. 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 comfort to those who mourn. Give healing to those who are suffering in body, mind or spirit, especially Katie, Judy, Darlene, Paul, Pam, Alrita, Jeff, Tessa, Lisa, Bud, Jim, those who suffer from Coronavirus, and those we name aloud and in our hearts. 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. Give us patience and courage. 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.**

"Merciful God, continue to accompany our journey through these forty days of Lent. Renew us in the gift of baptism, that we may provide for those in need, pray for the world and our neighbors, fast from self-indulgence, and find our treasure in the life of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. As we look to the election of a new bishop in our synod, be with our voting members as they nominate

candidates; help them to listen carefully for your voice. We pray for the bishop you are already preparing for our synod. 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.**

## LORD'S PRAYER

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

## God Loved the World



1 God loved the world so that he gave his on - ly  
2 Christ Je - sus is the ground of faith, who was made  
3 If you are ill, if death draws near, this truth your  
4 Be of good cheer, for God's own Son for - gives all  
5 All glo - ry to the Fa - ther, Son, and Ho - ly



Son the lost to save, that all who would in  
flesh and suf - fered death; all who con - fide in  
trou - bled heart can cheer: Christ Je - sus res - cues  
sins that you have done, and jus - ti - fied by  
Spir - it, Three in One! To you, O bless - ed



him be - lieve should ev - er - last - ing life re - ceive.  
Christ a - lone are built on this chief cor - ner - stone.  
us from death; that is the firm - est ground of faith.  
Je - sus' blood, your bap - tism grants the high - est good.  
Trin - i - ty, be praise now and e - ter - nal - ly!

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In preparation for writing this sermon for today, I had just finished reading the gospel passage, when I started reading a commentary. The commentary by Alicia D. Myers referenced "Jesus giving light and life..." I was thinking about these words, "light" and "life," when I looked up and saw a rainbow of colors "dancing" on the wall. The colors appeared like a prism, so I walked over to the window to see what was creating them. I moved a plastic geometric shape that is on the window ledge. As I did, the rainbow of colors moved, as well.

The rainbow made me think of God's covenant with Noah, that God would never again cause a flood to occur that would end humanity. God's forgiveness, grace, and mercy persists today and always, even though human beings continue to fall short of God's desires for them.

Two-thousand (2,000) years ago, human beings' accumulation of sins was so immense that God did something far beyond what any of us could imagine: God sent his son to atone for the sins of all humanity. God sent his son, so that through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, humanity would know the Word made flesh. God sent his son, so that those who believe in Jesus would experience forgiveness, grace and salvation through him.

The rainbow on the wall reminds us that we too can be "light" and "life" for the world. This is not because we can see the rainbow of light made from an inanimate object, but because we believe in the "light of God," whom we have never seen, yet whom we know is present among us.

In our baptism, the Holy Spirit comes to us and kindles our faith, so that we too have the light of God within us! The light is very small, but it grows as we hear God's word in scripture reading, preaching and song. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we can reflect and realize that we, too, can be "light" and "life" for others. As our faith grows through hearing God's word, our hearts are filled to overflowing, and we cannot help but to share the good news and our God-given gifts with others. Thanks be to God, for God's amazing love.

Peace,

Pastor Cathy