

Journey through Lent

Fourth Sunday of Lent • March 14, 2021

Opening Prayer

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others even if it has been a hectic day.

Leader: + In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

God of light, be our beacon in the darkness.

All: Enlighten us, O God.

Leader: Jesus, you who are the light of the world, help us to walk in your light.

All: Enlighten us, O Lord.

Leader: May we all live as sons and daughters of the light.

All: Amen.

Insights on the Readings

Rotate around the circle, having each person read a paragraph/bullet point aloud. For each reading, begin with the bullet points and then continue on to reading the passage from a Bible.

First Reading (2 Chronicles 36:14–16, 19–23)

- ▶ This passage summarizes how the Israelites (Jews) were taken off into the Babylonian exile and their eventual release by Cyrus, the Persian king.

Second Reading (Ephesians 2:4–10)

- ▶ In this reading, Paul shows us that God is rich in mercy.
- ▶ Paul also points out that our salvation is not due to anything we have done or accomplished, but rather is due to Christ.

Gospel Reading (John 3:14–21)

- ▶ This is the story of Jesus' encounter with the Pharisee, Nicodemus.

Reflections

Lent: A Time to Pay Attention to an Outsider

Today's first reading comes from the final chapter of 2 Chronicles. It narrates in detail the events that led up to Judah's exile in Babylon.

Some background is in order. The Babylonians captured the southern kingdom of Judah, ransacked the city of Jerusalem, burnt the temple, and sent the Israelites into exile in Babylon. This was done in two separate deportations, in 597 BC and 587 BC. The Babylonian exile, which lasted until 537 BC, was a spiritual blackout for the Jews exiled there. They lost their hope in God and the return to the homeland. In many ways, their nation were dismantled. They could not believe that God would allow the holy city of Jerusalem and its temple to be destroyed. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel ministered to the people in captivity.

To the surprise of all, God used a Gentile (non-Jewish) outsider, Cyrus the king of Persia, to release God's people from exile, and return them to their homeland and the holy city of Jerusalem.

There is a lesson we can all learn from this reading. Despite our despair, our sins, and the mystery of suffering, God does send us liberation and mercy. God uses the most unlikely of saviors, like Cyrus. We need to always be attuned to those unlikely outsiders who enter our lives, for they may be messengers of God.

Lent: A Time to Publicly Share Your Faith in Jesus

Encountering this Sunday's gospel is like trying to take a drink from a fire hose. It is filled with a variety of images that come at us with the power of the water pressure from a hydrant. This is typical of John's Gospel. The Gospel reading consists of a powerful flow of symbols: a serpent that is held up, eternal life, believing, and light. This is a lot to swallow all at once.

Let us begin with the character Nicodemus. He is a learned Pharisee, well-schooled in Jewish law (Torah) and its interpretation. He belonged to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court of the time. Earlier in John's Gospel, we learn he leaves his house one night under the veil of darkness to meet and talk with the rural carpenter/rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, from Galilee. Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness because he did not want to be known as a follower of Jesus. He was still uncommitted. Sometimes we act the same way—hiding our doubts and weak faith from others amidst the shadows. But we are called to live in the light and let others see our deeds so that God's glory is revealed in our lives. We are called to be courageous about our faith, to be more public about our commitment to it.

Lent: A Time to Look at Jesus

Jesus, the itinerant Galilean rabbi, is teaching the learned Nicodemus and all of us about what Moses did. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, recalling for him that Moses had "lifted up the serpent in the desert." Jesus rightly assumes that Nicodemus would immediately recognize this as an excerpt from the book of Numbers 21:4-9. The story in the book of Numbers is God's reaction to the Israelites' continual complaints in the desert.

The Israelites, once again lacking faith in God and Moses' leadership, and disgusted by the food offered them, challenged both God and Moses and expressed regret over leaving Egypt. As punishment,

God sent poisonous snakes to bite those who complained. The venomous snake bite often resulted in death. Repentant of their sins, the Israelites implored Moses to save them from the poisonous snakes. Following God's commands, Moses attached to a pole a bronze serpent. Snake-bitten Israelites who were repentant looked up at the bronze serpent on the pole and recovered from their snake bites.

Knowing this background, Jesus' words to Nicodemus "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" are to be interpreted as God once again offering salvation. This time, however, salvation comes through the cross of Christ and with the promise of eternal life.

The author of the Gospel of John is making use of a favorite technique here, that of double meaning. It is found in the expression "lifted up." It has the obvious physical meaning of placing something up high as a crane lifts objects at a skyscraper construction site. It also has the meaning that something or someone is highly elevated so as to be seen by people, like a child on his father's shoulders, or a flag in a parade. In the Gospel of John, Jesus, the Son of Man (a Semitic idiom that refers to a symbolic figure who will inaugurate the last days) will be lifted up high on the cross to be seen by all. All who look upon the crucified Jesus and believe in him will be saved.

Lent: A Time of Hopefulness

The meeting of Nicodemus and Jesus is one of the more hopeful episodes in the Gospels. Jesus welcomes Nicodemus with respect, understanding, and compassion. To Nicodemus—and to all of us—Jesus reveals a God of life. Not a God of condemnation and destruction, but a God of forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and ultimately, eternal life. This is a God in whom we can place our hope.

Lent: A Time to Realize and Believe that God so Loved the World

Jesus tells Nicodemus and all of us that God did not send his son into the world to condemn it. Rather, "...God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but might have eternal life" (John 3:16). Many of us have seen signs held up by fans in sporting arenas and stadiums with the words "John 3:16." For some unexplained reason, television cameras seem to zoom in on these signs. Yet how many of the fans know the deep meaning of the text which Martin Luther called "the Gospel in miniature?" The real meaning of the text revolves around "believing," a verb that appears five times in the passage.

What then are we suppose to believe? We are called to believe that God did not just love part of the world, but the whole world. Even though we suffer hurt, even though the world is lousy and innocent people die, God did not condemn the world. God loved it. God loved and continues to love it the very same way spouses love one another and a parent loves a child. God shared his son with everyone, and this love knows no bounds.

Lent: A time to embrace the light

The two words "believe" and "light" occur five times in the Gospel passage. The two words are related. God sends the light of his life, his Son, to us. God's Son comes as a "light" to enable humankind to realize and see the great love and mercy of God. The light who is Jesus enables us to see; in John's Gospel, seeing is believing. Our coming to the light to see and believe is expressed in the final sentence of the Gospel passage: "But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God." God's work done in us is this; to die to self so that we can be raised to new life. Our good works—doing our daily tasks with love and care, and acting justly and charitably—are our

ways of being “lifted up.” Finally, the gateway to eternal life is embracing our own cross daily so that all who see us raised up will have revealed to them Christ, the light of the world.

For Reflection

1. How do you relate to an outsider? Do you see him or her being used by God?
2. How has God raised you up daily from the difficulties and challenges of life?
3. What are some of the ways in which you publicly share your faith in Jesus?

Closing Prayer

Leader: O Lord, dispel the darkness of our minds
and be the light that shines in the hearts of your people.
Let us pray to the Lord.

All: Lord, hear our prayer.

Leader: God, lead us to Christ, the light of the world.
Let us pray to the Lord.

All: Lord hear our prayer.

Leader: God, heal us and preserve us from the skepticism of this world.
Let us pray to the Lord.

All: Lord hear our prayer.

Leader: By the example of our lives, may we become in Christ
the Light of the World that no darkness can overcome.
Let us pray to the Lord.

All: Lord hear our prayer.

Pray together the Our Father, then exchange a gesture of peace with all who are present.

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