

March 10, 2024
4th Sunday of Lent
John 3:14-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus: Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

For 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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

Background:

The Gospel for this Sunday is part of a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. (It might be helpful to read the entire dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, John 3:1-21) John uses a familiar theme in his Gospel of light and darkness to describe Jesus' presence in the world and those who reject Jesus.

The dialogue begins when "a certain Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, came to Jesus at night. 'Rabbi,' he said, 'we know you are a teacher come from God, for no man can perform signs and wonders such as you perform unless God is with him.'" (John 3:1-2) Jesus states that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." (John 3:3) Nicodemus responds by asking Jesus three questions and then Jesus asks two more. Jesus' responses form a dialogue that concludes in verse 21. The first statement reassures Nicodemus that no one can be part of the reign of God unless they are begotten from above. It is possible that Nicodemus' confusion has been caused by a word that can either mean "again" or "from above." In the second, Jesus tells him that one must be begotten of water and the Holy Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God. The third statement is the text for this Sunday, which deals with why the Son of Man had to be "lifted up."

In Jesus' response to Nicodemus he draws on the familiar story of Moses in the desert to explain how one can be begotten of the Spirit. Jesus likens himself lifted on the cross to the bronze serpent Moses used in the desert. The Lord told Moses to mount a bronze serpent on a pole that was lifted so those bitten by poisonous serpents during their journey through the desert might live. (Numbers 21:8-9) Jesus is saying that, in a like manner, he will be lifted up on a cross, and anyone who looks on him with faith will be saved from death and will have eternal life.

Jesus implies that he is light that has come into the world to reveal God's love for the world. But he also acknowledges that there are those who prefer the darkness. While this statement may be addressed to Nicodemus who has come to Jesus under the cover of darkness, for John it may also be true of the members of the Christian community who conceal their relationship with the community in order to avoid difficulties.

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever hidden parts of who you are to avoid questions, embarrassment, or the judgement of others?
2. Do you know people who openly let others know that they are in recovery, in a second marriage, or drawn to a person of the same sex? What happens within you when you encounter such a person?
3. Do you remember having conversations that went into the night?

4. Do you know people who seem more prone than others to wrestle with questions of life and faith in God?
5. Are you one of those people?
6. Have you ever thought God was deliberately remaining mysterious, hidden, or difficult to understand?
7. What kind of God would God be, if God were easy to understand?
8. Why do you think many monastic communities gather to pray in the night and at an hour before dawn? Do you think the darkness and the night have an impact on the quality of their prayer?
9. Do you ever pray to God in the quiet of the night?
10. Can you take some time to talk with God about your questions, about how Jesus seems to be responding to Nicodemus, or about your own desire to be in right relationship with God?

The Gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to fr.paul.gallagher.ofm@gmail.com.

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fsccl-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the Readings for March 14, 2021, the Fourth Sunday of Lent

In those days, the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people were practicing abominations and polluting the Lord's temple in Jerusalem. Early and often did the Lord send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place. But they despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until his anger was so inflamed that there was no remedy. Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects. Those who escaped the sword were carried captive to Babylon, where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons until the Persians came to power. All this was to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah: "Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths, during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest while seventy years are fulfilled." In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom: "All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me, and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him!"

Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you! By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. On the aspens of that land we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked of us the lyrics of our songs, and our despoilers urged us to be joyous:

*“Sing for us the songs of Zion!” How could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?
May my tongue cleave to my palate if I place not Jerusalem ahead of my joy.*

Brothers and sisters: God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ, raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens, that in the ages to come He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast. For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them.

Jesus said to Nicodemus: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” For 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. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. Whoever does wicked things does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

Excerpts from 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; Psalm 137:1-6; Ephesians 2:4-10; and John 3:14-21

Friends,

Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for March 10th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. On this Fourth Sunday of Lent, we hear from John’s Gospel where Jesus explains to the Pharisee Nicodemus that God gave his only son to be lifted up, that whoever believes in him might be saved through him into eternal life. “Whoever believes in him will not be condemned.”

The other readings also have references to the Lord intervening for the benefit of his people. In the first reading from 2 Chronicles, God fulfilled the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah. He inspired Cyrus, king of the Persians, to release the Israelites from captivity in Babylon, so they could return to Jerusalem. “Whoever among you belongs to any part of his people, let him go up, and may his God be with him!” Psalm 137 laments the captivity: “By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. How could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?” In the second reading, from the letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "Because of the great love he had for us, God brought us to life with Christ. By grace you have been saved, through faith; this is the gift of God."

Once again this week in the readings we get a comparison of Old Testament (old covenant) methods alongside New Testament (new covenant) methods of intervention, with Jesus personifying the new merciful approach. This opportunity is extended to all, through the grace of God. One other related reference in the Gospel, as Jesus talks with Nicodemus, reminds us of the significance of the ultimate three days coming at the close of the Lenten season: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (on the cross).

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!

The light came into the world;
whoever lives the truth comes to the light.

John 3:19, 21

