

March 11, 2018  
4th Sunday of Lent  
John 3:14-21

[Jesus said to Nicodemus:] And 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 that Jesus had with Nicodemus. That dialogue began when “a certain Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, came to him 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) Nicodemus asks three questions of Jesus, and Jesus’ responses form a dialogue that concludes in verse 21. In the first of the narratives, Jesus reassures Nicodemus that no one can be part of the reign of God unless they are begotten from above. While the question is not directly stated in the text, it seems 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 response is the text for this Sunday, which deals with why the Son of Man had to be “lifted up.”

In order to protect his reputation as a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night. Later in John’s gospel, the reactions to Jesus’ teaching in the temple produced a divided response, with some believing him and others wanting him arrested. The chief priests and the Pharisees insulted the Temple police for not arresting Jesus on the spot. (John 7: 45-49) But Nicodemus questioned their thinking. “Since when does our law condemn any man without first hearing him and knowing the facts?” (John 7:51) At that point they turn their taunts on Nicodemus. “You are not from Galilee also, are you? Look and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.” (John 7:52B) Finally, at the end of John’s gospel, it was Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, who made sure that Jesus’ body was buried. (John 19:38-42)

In Jesus’ response to Nicodemus that is recorded in the gospel text for today, Jesus draws on the familiar story of Moses in the desert to explain how one can be begotten of the Spirit. Jesus makes a bridge between himself, who will be lifted up on the cross, and the bronze serpent Moses used in the desert. The Lord told Moses to mount a bronze serpent on a pole and lift it up in the air. Anyone who had been bitten by a snake and then looked upon the serpent would be cured. (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.

#### Reflection Questions:

1. Do you know people who seem to need time to wrestle with questions of life, meaning, and their belief in God?
2. Have you ever had questions about your faith or about your relationship with God?
3. Have you ever thought God was deliberately remaining mysterious, hidden, or difficult to understand?
4. Have you ever asked yourself what kind of God would God be if God were easy to understand, and easy to perceive?
5. 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?
6. Do you ever pray to God in the quiet of the night?

7. How do you see Jesus responding to Nicodemus in this text?
8. How do you reconcile what Jesus is saying in this text, about those who are already condemned for their lack of faith, and how he is responding to Nicodemus?
9. Jesus draws on the image of the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up for people to look at and be healed. Jesus then says: "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Have you ever prayed by just looking at the image of Jesus on the cross? What does this text say to you about that kind of prayer?
10. Why would it have been important for John's community to remember and record Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus?
11. 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 [annemarie.lom@gmail.com](mailto:annemarie.lom@gmail.com)

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#### **Excerpts from the Readings for March 11, 2018, 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**