

MARCH 10, 2024
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT



“LOVE LIFTED ME”

ST. JOHN UNITED
CHURCH OF CHRIST

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***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

ONE: God’s love is for all of creation.

MANY: The vastness of God is for human, animal, soil, and sun, all together as God’s beloved.

ONE: God has not come into the world in Jesus to condemn us.

MANY: Jesus has come to live God’s love in the flesh.

ONE: While the world is dim with injustice and the feeling of loneliness,

MANY: it is in Jesus that the light of love illumines our path of friendship. Come, let us join our lives with the Friend, whose love is for the whole world. Let us worship God!

***INVOCATION:**

O God who is Friend, the vastness of your love flows through all of creation, and this is cause for rejoicing. For all the harshness and condemnation that we see in the world, you have come to us out of love, compassion, and to save us from ourselves. We acknowledge our belief that you have come to redeem, to heal, to restore, and forgive, not just some of the world, but all of the world. May our worship embody the love and light you bring in Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

***CALL TO CONFESSION:** Our time of penitence before God gives us the opportunity to rid ourselves of the weights we carry, the lingering sense that we have not lived up to our full potential, that we have cheated others, that we are disoriented and mired down in troubles of our own making. Let our individual confessions be gathered up in the confessions of the church.

***PRAYER OF TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE:**
Holy One, we confess there are moments when we desire to see you bring condemnation on others or wish that your love was not for the whole world, but just a few. Like us. But, your love is bigger than our limited lenses, broader than our small scope of vision of all that love embodies. Help us to see the world as you do. Help us to love as you do. Release us from our need to condemn and set us free for love. For, it is what you came enfleshed to show us. Amen.

WORDS OF GRACE:

Jesus has come into the world not to condemn it, but to set us free by love. Know the grace of God surrounds you and keeps you in love now and forever. Amen.

EPISTLE LESSON: Ephesians 2:1-10
Saved from sin to life

2 At one time you were like a dead person because of the things you did wrong and your offenses against God. ² You used to live like people of this world. You followed the rule of a destructive spiritual power. This is the spirit of disobedience to God's will that is now at work in persons whose lives are characterized by disobedience. ³ At one time you were like those persons. All of you used to do whatever felt good and whatever you thought you wanted so that you were children headed for punishment just like everyone else.

⁴⁻⁵ However, God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace! ⁶ And God raised us up and seated us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. ⁷ God did this to show future generations the greatness of his grace by the goodness that God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

⁸ You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. ⁹ It's not something you did that you can be proud of. ¹⁰ Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.

***GOSPEL LESSON: John 3:14-21**

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. ¹⁶ God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. ¹⁷ God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son.

¹⁹ "This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. ²⁰ All who do wicked things hate the light and don't come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. ²¹ Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God."

MESSAGE: "Look Up"

Just so we can put the words I just read into context, these words are the end of Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who came to Jesus by night to ask questions. Verses 1-13. In Jesus' first answer to Nicodemus, we hear for the first time these words, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Jesus speaks many truth to Nicodemus and then we

come to verse 14 – 15, "¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life."

In William Barclay's commentary he is discussing what the author of the gospel of John is telling us. "John goes back to a strange Old Testament story which is told in Numbers 21:4-9. On their journey through the wilderness, the people of Israel murmured and complained and regretted that they had ever left Egypt. To punish them, God sent a plague of deadly, fiery serpents; the people repented and cried for mercy.

God instructed Moses to make an image of a serpent and to hold it up in the center of the camp; and those who looked upon the serpent were healed. That story much impressed the Israelites. They told how in later times that bronze serpent became an idol and in the days of Hezekiah had to be destroyed because people were worshipping it. The Jews themselves were always a little puzzled by this incident in view of the fact that they were absolutely forbidden to make graven images. The Rabbis explained it this way: 'it was not the serpent that gave life. So long as Moses lifted up the serpent, they believed on him who had commanded Moses to act thus. It was God who healed them.' The healing power lay not in the bronze serpent; it was only a symbol to turn their thoughts to God; and when they did that, they were healed.

The author of the gospel of John took that old story and used it as a kind of parable of Jesus. He says: 'The serpent was lifted up; the people looked at it; their thoughts were turned to God; and by the power of that God in whom they trusted they were healed. Likewise Jesus must be lifted up, and when people turn their thoughts to him, and believe in him, they too will find eternal life,'

William Barclay continues, "The verb for *to lift up* is *hupsoun*. The strange thing is that it is used of Jesus in two senses. It is used of his being *lifted upon the cross* and it is used of his being *lifted up into glory* at the time of his ascension into heaven. These two events are inextricably connected. The one could not have happened without the other. For Jesus, the cross was the way to glory; had he refused it, had he evaded it, had he taken steps to escape it, as he could have easily done, there would have been no glory for him. It is the same for us. We can, if we like, refuse the cross that every Christian is called to bear; but if we do, we lose the glory. It is an unalterable law of life that if there is no cross, there is no crown."

No matter what trials and tribulations we go through, we must always "look up" for healing. If we look up, the Lord will lift us up. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious and ever loving God, we come to you this morning for many things on our hearts. In our world of deceit and lying, it's difficult to tell who is with and who isn't. There's too much bickering at our nation's capital. Instead of finding ways to help the citizens of this country, it seems like the politicians just want to find ways to disgrace their colleagues. Please remind those in charge of our country of why they have been elected and what are they expected to accomplish why they represent the rest of us. Help them realize their opportunities to care for the needs of rich and poor, weak and strong, male and female employer and employee, and that we may work together in harmony and good faith.

Bless our church as we work together to feed the hungry, and serve other missions to help In anyway we can. Help us be a presence of hope in our community as we share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Today we celebrate an amazing anniversary. Two people who have loved each other and God to remain together for 60 years. They are an inspiration to all.

We pray for all those in our congregation who are ill and unable to be as active in the church as they once were. Bring the light of your heart to them so they know they are still loved.

We pray all these things in the name of your Son, Jesus, who taught us to pray . . .

THE 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 debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

**PRAYER RESPONSE: Three fold Amen
Amen, Amen, A-men.**

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:

Today we rejoice in a God who comes to redeem the world through a pouring out of Divine Love. Our rejoicing is offered with the generosity of our energy, our spiritual gifts, and our treasure. We are invited as God's beloved children to express our rejoicing this day through the giving of our gifts in love. May it be so.

***PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING:**

Thank you, God, for loving us to the very ends of the earth and back. Your willingness to say yes to coming in the flesh to redeem our world through love and no to the powers of oppression has led us to give of ourselves generously this day. Take these

gifts and multiply them across this world that you love so extravagantly. Amen.

***BENEDICTION:**

Go, dear ones, in the hope of the one who does not condemn, but brings life, light, and compassion to all. Step into this world in the assurance that God's love is enough for our lives. In fact, it is more than enough. In the name of the Friend, the Companion, and the Comforter, go forth in peace. Amen.