

**March 7, 2021**

**Third Sunday in Lent**



**“The Scandal of Crucifixion”**

**St. John United Church of Christ**

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Fairview Heights, IL 62208

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Secretary – Judy Hartman

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Prayers and Liturgy by

Rev. Thomas Shuman

**Have your communion elements handy.**

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

**CALL TO WORSHIP:**

The morning stars profess God's glory:  
**the waking birds harmonize a refrain of grace.**

The sun warms us with God's hope,  
the night sky whispers peace to our sleepy souls:

**creation's voice echoes continually in our hearts, reminding us of God's steadfast love.**

Our wisdom is shattered by God's absurd love; God's vulnerability strengthens our feeble faith:

**God's words place joy in our hearts;  
we follow them to peace and hope.**

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION:**

You saw your children as slaves in Egypt,  
and brought them to freedom; you see  
creation held captive by our desire for  
more and more, and weep; and so you  
pour out your foolish love on us from day  
to day.

All that we have learned and think we  
know has not brought meaning to our lives;  
the brokenness of our world needs your  
peace; our pain-shattered hearts

need your healing: and so you speak to us through the mouth of your Servant, Jesus.

All creation weeps with grief, and cries to you for comfort; all the broken of our world long for your wholeness; all who hunger for hope long for the sweetness of your grace and joy; and so you fill us with the Wisdom of your Spirit. AMEN.

#### **CALL TO RECONCILIATION:**

At the center of the law is God's love - that divine nonsense shown in becoming human for our sake; that weakness for us which defeats the strongest powers. This love, this grace is of more value to us than all the stocks in our pension funds. Let us open ourselves to such love as we open our hearts to confess our sins to God.

#### **UNISON PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS:**

**You give us your commandments, Holy One, so we may have new life, but we continue to make the same old choices. Your love can anchor us when life threatens to overwhelm us, but we choose to cling to the slippery rocks of anger and bitterness. Your Word can strengthen us**

**for every moment, but we listen to the foolish promises of the world.**

**Forgive us, Redeemer of our lives: may every word be shaped by your Word; may every thought be refined by your grace; may every deed be inspired by your Spirit, so we may tell everyone we meet of your work in us, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.**

*Silence is kept*

#### **ASSURANCE OF PARDON:**

When brokenhearted prayers replace piety, when we seek wholeness through the One broken for us, then we remember we are saved by God's powerful love.

**We are healed, to bring healing to our world; we are strengthened in faith, to become spent for others; we are set free from our bondage to sin, so we may become servants of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.**



**SCRIPTURE: Psalm 19** (*I invite you to spend some time with this beautiful hymn. The imagery of the heaven and sky praising*

*God is just one of the gifts we have.)*

**19** Heaven is declaring God's glory;  
the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.  
**2** One day gushes the news to the next,  
and one night informs another what needs  
to be known.  
**3** Of course, there's no speech, no words—  
their voices can't be heard—  
**4** but their sound extends throughout the  
world; their words reach the ends of the  
earth. God has made a tent in heaven for the  
sun.  
**5** The sun is like a groom coming out of his  
honeymoon suite; like a warrior, it thrills at  
running its course.  
**6** It rises in one end of the sky; its circuit is  
complete at the other. Nothing escapes its  
heat.  
**7** The LORD's Instruction is perfect,  
reviving one's very being.  
The LORD's laws are faithful,

making naive people wise.  
**8** The LORD's regulations are right,  
gladdening the heart.  
The LORD's commands are pure,  
giving light to the eyes.  
**9** Honoring the LORD is correct,  
lasting forever.  
The LORD's judgments are true.  
All of these are righteous!  
**10** They are more desirable than gold—  
than tons of pure gold!  
They are sweeter than honey—  
even dripping off the honeycomb!  
**11** No doubt about it:  
your servant is enlightened by them;  
there is great reward in keeping them.  
**12** But can anyone know  
what they've accidentally done wrong?  
Clear me of any unknown sin  
**13** and save your servant from willful sins.  
Don't let them rule me.  
Then I'll be completely blameless;  
I'll be innocent of great wrongdoing.  
**14** Let the words of my mouth  
and the meditations of my heart  
be pleasing to you,  
LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

### **1 Corinthians 1:18-25 NRSV**

<sup>18</sup> For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written,

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Isaiah 29:14*

<sup>20</sup> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

### **MESSAGE: “The Scandal of Crucifixion”**

(With thoughts from Carl R. Holladay.)

It’s difficult for us who live so many centuries after Jesus’ passion to truly understand how scandalous crucifixion was. Just to hear the word would have terrorized anyone who lived in the first century. And that was precisely why the Romans used this type of punishment. They wanted to scare anyone else who might threaten their authority.

Can you imagine the difficulty the Apostle Paul had when he traveled throughout the middle east to preach and teach his message that Jesus was the messiah who was crucified and was resurrected three days later? Using the word “crucifixion” was a huge stumbling block for many people he was trying to reach. Paul was painfully aware that the message of the crucified Christ scarcely commended itself to first century hearers, Jews and Greeks. Today we would say the message was a “hard sell.”

For Jews, the notion of a suffering messiah was a contradiction in terms. To be crucified, or “hanged from a tree,” was a sure sign of criminality and therefore offensive to readers of the Torah. Greek notions of

heroic ideals were many and varied, but a hero who died on a cross had little lasting appeal to them. The philosopher was a much more popular ideal for most Greeks. To be sure, for Paul to say that “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom” was a caricature, but like most caricatures, there was a core of truth. (This is like political cartoons today.)

That explains why Paul wrote that the message of the crucified Christ was a “stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

Even though some Jews and Gentiles had become Christians, they had done so by confronting directly the scandal of the cross. In one sense, this scandal remains. As one reflects on the passion of Christ, it never becomes a sensible message. In fact, the longer one lives with the Christian message the more one becomes convinced of its essential contradiction. Verse 25 “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

It is only natural for us, as human beings, to assess and scrutinize the ways of God, to

employ human wisdom in trying to make sense of divine realities. For Paul it represents a fundamentally wrong way of conceiving the relationship between us and God. In verse 19 Paul cites Isaiah 29:14 as a way of reminding his readers that God’s ways are beyond the scope of human wisdom. In defense of God, Paul asks rhetorically, “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?” verse 20.

The proper stance from which one can view the work of God is confessional (*trust and believe*). Paul recognizes that accepting the gospel is a personal act. The gospel is the power of God to “us who are being saved” (verse 18.) It is out of our own experience of the saving work of God that we are able to recognize the crucified Christ as “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (verse 24).

Two thousand years later we live in a scientific world and have been taught to think for ourselves. We all want to learn more. Paul reminds us that “knowledge” should be balanced by “love” (1 Cor. 8:1-2).

We have so many questions about the passion story, but we are called to live with the contradictions and inconsistencies. We are called to accept what God is doing, for we can never be as wise as God. That position is already taken. Amen.



**THE LORD'S PRAYER:** Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR GIFTS:**

**PRAYER OF DEDICATION/OFFERING:**

Make us foolish enough in our generosity,

O God, that we might become wise enough to know that our gifts will bless others - the hungry, the lonely, the searching, the weak. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

**GREAT PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING  
HOLY COMMUNION:**

May the God of holy words be with you.

**May the Meditation of our hearts be with you.**

People of God, open yourselves to the One who is your rock.

**God fills us with foolishness, so we may be wise.**

Children of God, sing songs of thanksgiving with all creation.

**Our voices are lifted to the One who makes all things.**

You spoke those words of creation, God of faithfulness, and set the sun to run its daily course, filled the seas with imaginative creatures, planted fruits and vegetables in the earth. All that is good and generous was intended for your children shaped in your image, but we bore false witness against you,

honoring sin and death more than you.  
The prophets came to warn against our  
foolishness, but we did not find their words  
acceptable, and continued to covet everything  
which did not belong to us.  
So you sent your Child to us, so we might find  
strength in his weakness, we might find glory  
through his humiliation.

With those who have great faith,  
with those who have very little,  
we sing our thanksgivings to you:

**Holy, holy, holy are you, God of mountaintops.  
The heavens join all creation to tell of your  
glory. Hosanna in the highest!**

**Blessed is the One who is foolish for our sake.  
Hosanna in the highest!**

Day to day, you are holy, our God,  
and Jesus Christ declares your wisdom to us.  
The Word of your mouth, he came, to tell us of  
your work of grace and hope.  
The Meditation of your heart, he came, to quiet  
our frantic spirits so we might rest in you.  
Your foolishness, he was wise enough

to take our sins to the cross.  
Your weakness, he was strong enough to  
endure death for us, until you brought him out  
of the grave.

As we remember his zeal for your heart,  
as we remember his passion for us,  
we would speak of that mystery we know as  
faith:

**Christ died, the rock which broke sin's power;  
Christ was raised, death conquered by our  
redeemer; Christ will return, desiring us more  
than anything in all creation.**

Here at this Table, God of love, we set aside our  
power to feast on the weakness found in the  
broken bread; we let go of our wisdom,  
to drink from the cup of your foolish grace.

Your Spirit blesses these gifts, as well as us,  
so when we have feasted, we will look at the  
world with its injustices, oppressions, wars, and  
fears, saying, 'take these things out of here!  
Stop making God's creation a house of horrors!'  
And when the sun has finished its course,  
when the moon and stars shine no more,  
we will be given the words from your mouth

so we can sing from the deeps of our hearts to you, God in Community, Holy in One. Amen.

**SHARING THE ELEMENTS:**



**SENDING:**

God speaks, and sends us forth.

**We will go to proclaim God's grace and glory.**

Jesus speaks, and lives are changed.

**We will go to set free the oppressed,  
to be the voice for those never heard.**

The Spirit speaks, and the world is turned inside out.

**We will become as foolish as a trusting child,  
as powerless as those overlooked by everyone  
around them. Amen.**

(c) Thom M. Shuman

**PRAYER LIST: We pray for the health and well-being of all affected by the pandemic and we especially pray for: Urban Baum, Rich Schmitt, Donna Isselhard, Shari Hamilton, Becky Ballard, P.J. Bennett.**



**DON'T FORGET DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME BEGINS NEXT SUNDAY MARCH 14.** Set your clocks forward an hour.