

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

John 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so everyone who believes in him might have
eternal life.

Gospel

John 3:14-21; L32B

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.**

Reflecting on the Gospel

Today we hear one of the most well-known and best-loved verses in the whole of John’s gospel, a verse that proclaims “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.” These words are spoken in the context of the night visit of Nicodemus to Jesus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and Jewish leader and teacher, avoids the daylight that might reveal him as associating with a man who is

unpopular with the religious institution, and so arouse suspicion of Nicodemus’s own motives and stance. To be unafraid or unashamed of professing our friendship with Jesus by the way we live every day always brings hard demands. The German theologian Eugen Drewermann gives us a memorable image of ourselves when, in the words of the gospel, we have “preferred darkness to light,” to that light which is the only Son of God, given for its salvation to the world that God loves so much: “It can happen that we become like bats, like night-flying creatures who are so accustomed to the dark that our whole biorhythm is attuned to these shadowy periods, as if our eyes would be hurt and our whole lives would be turned inside out if we were dragged out of our caves and the hidden and fearful forms of



our existence were exposed to the quiet regions of light and the brightness of day” (*Dying We Live: Meditations for Lent and Easter*).

But we often prefer the false safety of darkness to the light of Christ that exposes, for example, our selfish, racist, sexist, or violent selves. We all have our own caves that we need to name. Lent is designed to drag us out of their darkness into the Easter light of Christ through prayer, fasting, and the “alms-giving” of the gift of ourselves as well as the offer of material assistance to our sisters and brothers in many kinds of need.

To help the night visitor, Nicodemus, to come into the light of understanding something of his mystery and mission, Jesus uses a good catechetical approach: he talks the language of his listener. He reminds this “teacher of Israel” (John 3:10; NABRE), who is very much in the dark, of a story from their own Hebrew Scriptures (Num 21:4-9). In the wilderness, the people grumble against God and are struck with a plague of serpents whose bite could cause death. The people come to Moses, admit their sinfulness, and ask him to intercede for them with God. When he does so, God tells Moses to forge a bronze serpent, fix it and raise it up before those who are stricken. If they gaze on it, they will be saved. This seems a great paradox: healing and life from gazing on a creature of death! But they obey and are healed.

In our humanity, we are all bitten by death; yet, Jesus tells Nicodemus, the God who is love wants to give us life that never ends. And so the flesh of the Son of Man will be brutally, senselessly twisted around the wood of the cross, forged by the fire of his passion and death, and raised up for our salvation. In John’s gospel, “raising” or “lifting up” always has the double sense of crucifixion and exaltation, death and resurrection, for the two movements are inseparable. To

Year A readings may be used, see Appendix A, pp. 270–272.

gaze with the eyes of faith on this mystery and commit ourselves to it will mean eternal life. Jesus does not come to judge, but just as turning on a light exposes what is hidden in darkness, so it is when the light of Christ shines upon us to expose both good and evil. The cross that will be raised up and venerated on Good Friday will give way at the Easter Vigil to the raised Easter candle, marked with the cross of fragrant “nails” of incense, from which we catch fire and rekindle our baptismal commitment to the saving and universal love of Jesus Christ.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, / so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”

To the point: Today’s gospel refers to an event that occurred as the people of Israel sojourned in the desert after their escape from slavery in Egypt and before entering into the Promised Land. The people, weary from their travel, complain bitterly against God and Moses: “Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!” (Num 21:5; NABRE). The people are punished for their complaints with serpent bites, and then saved from their punishment when God commands Moses, “Make a seraph and mount it on a pole, and everyone who has been bitten will look at it and recover” (Num 21:8; NABRE). And now, in today’s gospel, Jesus is compared to this “sign of salvation” (Wis 16:6; NABRE), for when he is lifted up, “everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

Connecting the Gospel

to the first and the second readings: In today’s gospel we find the oft-quoted line, “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.” The first and second reading echo this theme of God’s unfailing mercy. The narrator from the second book of Chronicles tells us, “Early and often did the Lord, the God of their fathers, / send his messengers” to his wayward people. Though they had been unfaithful even to the point of “polluting the Lord’s temple” and practicing “abominations,” God still has “compassion on his people and his dwelling place.” We see God’s grace at work calling the people of Israel who had been exiled from their homeland to return once more to Jerusalem to rebuild his house. Similarly, St. Paul writes to the Ephesians that they have been saved through no merit of their own but purely through “the gift of God.”

to experience: As St. Paul writes, our God is “rich in mercy” and in Jesus we receive the greatest gift of his mercy—that even in our sinfulness, Jesus did not come to condemn but to save. How is God calling you to accept this mercy in your life and also to extend it to others?

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: While today’s first reading gives a synopsis of the Babylonian exile, the psalm gives voice to the captives’ sorrow. In this time of exile the people of God enter into their faith in a new way. Though the temple has been destroyed and the holy city of Jerusalem ransacked, the people are sustained by their memories and also in the sure knowledge that their God is still with them.

to psalmist preparation: Even in exile, the people learn how to “sing a song of the Lord / in a foreign land.” What has brought you comfort in times of grief or struggle?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

In the first reading we hear that “early and often did the Lord . . . send messengers to them” to call the people back to the covenant. Which saints throughout the ages have inspired your spiritual journey?

Today’s psalm asks, “How could we sing a song to the Lord / in a foreign land?” When in your life (either physically or spiritually) have you experienced being far from home and what sustained you in that time?

St. Paul writes to the Ephesians that we are God’s “handiwork.” Where do you see the handiwork of God flourishing in your family and community?

In today’s gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “[T]he light came into the world, / but people preferred darkness to light.” Where do you perceive light encountering darkness in your community at this moment?