

Gospel lesson

Today's Gospel reading picks up in the middle of Jesus' nighttime discussion with Nicodemus. Jesus just finished explaining to him about the need to be born again, through the Spirit, and now comes an exposition about the true role of the Messiah.



picture from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Chosen_-_Nicodemus_and_Jesus.jpg;
credit: The Chosen press photos

John 3:14-21 (NRSV)

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

¹⁹And this is the judgment, that the light has come

into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

The word of God for the people of God

Interactive lesson



picture from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gnome-face-sick.svg>

What do you do when you are sick? <Let them respond>

What do you do when someone you love is ailing?

<Let them respond>

What do you do when someone you do not really care about is in need of medical attention?

<Let them respond>

Are the people you help when they are ailing always grateful for the help? <Let them respond>

What were the Israelites in the desert ailing from?

<Let them respond>

What did God do for them? What problem did God address? <Let them respond>

The Israelites in the desert sinned against God in

trying to do things differently than God led them to do. The snake bites were a consequence of that; the snake lifted up on the pole was both a way for people to be cured of the terrible effects of the bites and a reminder of God's wisdom, power, and grace for the people.

Do you think the Israelites were grateful for the help? <Let them respond>

What about people living today? What are we ailing from? <Let them respond>

What did Jesus do for us? <Let them respond>

People sin against God in trying to do things differently than God leads us to do. Like snake bites, our sins hurt one another, a consequence of not following God's will. The human Jesus lifted up on the cross is both a way for people to be cured of the terrible effects of human sin and a reminder of God's wisdom, power, and grace for all of us.

Do you think people are grateful for the help?
<Let them respond>

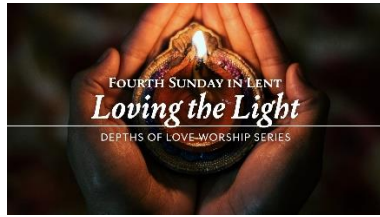
God's Light came into the world that we could come out of the darkness of sin. How do you show that you are grateful for the Lord's help? <Let them respond>

May you let the light of Christ shine through you, that others may have hope in God too.

<Hymn "There Is a Balm in Gilead">

UMH # 375>

Message: Loving the Light



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/depths-of-love/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Stunningly beautiful Light of the world,
as we take time now to further consider today's
scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may be illuminated by Your grace and share
the light of Your love with everyone. Amen.

In searching the "Depths of Love" this Lenten season,
we come today to "Loving the Light":

"This week, we continue our mid-Lent excursion
into the Gospel of John by listening in on Jesus'
conversation with Nicodemus [and] ponder[ing] how
[we may] be the people of God throughout the week
as we continue to learn to turn from condemnation
[to] lov[ing] the Light."



picture screencaptured from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1YdWqZuHao>;
credit: Hackensack Fire Department

A couple of decades ago during a warm dry evening, there was an emergency call to deal with a vehicle that had gone into the river. When emergency services got there, the driver had already self-extricated and was splashing around in the water.

The responders on the riverbank, hoping he could come out without them having to go into the water, asked him if he could come out. Being rather intoxicated, he replied, "I'm taking a bath!" and continued splashing water on himself.

What he needed and what he thought he needed while under the influence of alcohol were very different things. He did not want to do what the emergency personnel were telling him he needed to do. He did not like when they intervened with a backboard and straps, forcing him to get out of the river and into an ambulance where he could get the care he needed.

The people of Israel in the desert thought they knew what they needed; instead of trusting in God to provide, they tried to take control of the situation. God saw them under the influence of sin and called them to trust their divine direction.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/wcy-numbers2/>

When they resisted, God sent the snakes to force them

to [return to living as the covenant community they needed to be] in order to survive. When they repented and turned to God by looking at the snake on the pole, God healed them both in body and in spirit.

God made the people realize that God was in control and blessing the faithful. We see that in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus too. Worldly people think they know what is needed and try to address problems accordingly, saying "Just be kind" and trying to set up their microcosm of life to be nicer than the world at large. However, they have neither the perspective nor the power of God to address the root problem of the world's evils, Sin. We need to listen to Jesus. God shows far greater kindness than we ever can.



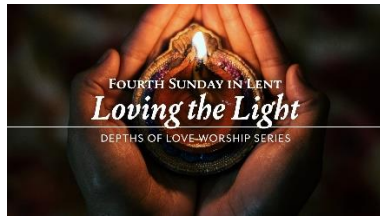
picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/jesus-dies/>

Jesus told Nicodemus exactly what was coming. Just as a snake was lifted up on pole for the Israelites in the desert, Jesus was to be lifted up on the cross, so that those metaphorically bitten by sinful humans could look at the human on the cross and be healed.

Just as those EMS providers did not show up on the riverbank to restrain and convict the drunk driver but to provide healing care, so also the Son of God did not show up to condemn but to provide salvation. And with Jesus, it is not just life in this world

that is saved, but eternal life in God's kingdom.

But many people do not recognize this. Like the drunk driver, they are under the influence of Sin, do not understand what truly is needed, and are unwilling to listen to the Holy Spirit moving in their lives. "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/depths-of-love/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-graphics>

But there is hope for those who do turn to the Light, who love Jesus, because God heals us. As Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

So what can we do, if we cannot save ourselves?

- † This week, start by looking at where you are complaining, and try counting blessings instead.
- † Instead of condemning others, repent of your own sins and try to understand why others sinned.
- † Pray to God, thank Jesus, and listen to the Holy Spirit.
- † Live as Jesus taught – you are a model for Christianity to the community in which you live.
- † Demonstrate God's holy, nurturing love and build

relationships based upon it.

† Invite those with whom you build those relationships into our Christian community, to know Jesus better and to live with the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Let the light of Christ shine through you, that all may love the light and join the kingdom of God.

And with that in mind, let us now recite together the United Methodist social creed:

OUR SOCIAL CREED (2016 UMC Book of Discipline)

We believe in God, Creator of the world;

and in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of creation.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,

through whom we acknowledge God's gifts,

and we repent of our sin

in misusing these gifts to idolatrous ends.

We affirm the natural world as God's handiwork

and dedicate ourselves to its preservation,

enhancement, and faithful use by humankind.

We joyfully receive for ourselves and others

the blessings of community, sexuality, marriage,

and the family.

We commit ourselves to the rights of men, women,

children, youth, young adults,

the aging, and people with disabilities;

to improvement of the quality of life;

and to the rights and dignity of all persons.
We believe in the right and duty of persons
to work for the glory of God
and the good of themselves and others
and in the protection of their welfare in so doing;
in the rights to property as a trust from God,
collective bargaining, and responsible consumption;
and in the elimination of economic and social
distress.

We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world,
to the rule of justice and law among nations,
and to individual freedom for all people of the
world.

We believe in the present and final triumph
of God's Word in human affairs
and gladly accept our commission
to manifest the life of the gospel in the world.
Amen.

A COMPANION LITANY TO OUR SOCIAL CREED

(2016 UMC Book of Discipline)

God in the Spirit revealed in Jesus Christ, calls us
by grace

**to be renewed in the image of our Creator,
that we may be one in divine love for the world.**

Today is the day God cares for the integrity of
creation, wills the healing and wholeness of all
life, weeps at the plunder of earth's goodness.

And so shall we.

Today is the day God embraces all hues of humanity,

delights in diversity and difference, favors
solidarity transforming strangers into friends.

And so shall we.

Today is the day God cries with the masses of
starving people, despises growing disparity between
rich and poor, demands justice for workers in the
marketplace.

And so shall we.

Today is the day God deplores violence in our homes
and streets, rebukes the world's warring madness,
humbles the powerful and lifts up the lowly.

And so shall we.

Today is the day God calls for nations and peoples to
live in peace, celebrates where justice and mercy
embrace, exults when the wolf grazes with the lamb.

And so shall we.

Today is the day God brings good news to the poor,
proclaims release to the captives, gives sight to
the blind, and sets the oppressed free.

And so shall we.

<Doxology>

<Offertory / Pastoral Prayer>

God of unwavering love, you have held nothing back in
your love for us, not even your Son.

How we marvel at that kind of love, and how we long
to reflect a portion of that devotion back to you.

As we dedicate our offerings to you, lead us away
from our tendency to hold back and worry that there
will not be enough.

Help us to live as the people of love and abundance
you have called us to be.

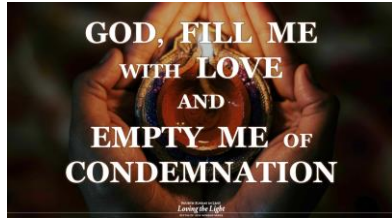
(above prayer from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org>)

- Lord, please help {these members of the body of Christ whom we lift up} with Your healing touch and comfort:
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- Thanks for
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- Hold those who cannot be with us in Your loving embrace until we see them again.
 - Family far off
 - Travelers
- Lord, please help all people who struggle, especially those to whom we remain oblivious.
- Send Your Spirit to address world/social problems
 - end bigotry, dismantle racism, reform systems persist
 - bring world peace
- Guide our Leaders – local, state, federal, international, and especially of Your church.

All these things we pray as You taught us to pray,
<The Lord's Prayer>

<Hymn "For the Healing of the Nations" UMH #428>

<Benediction>



background picture from
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/depths-of-love/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-graphics>

Beloved, today God sends us out
with a blessing and a practice.

Repeat after me:

(breathe in) God, fill me with Love ...

(breathe out) and empty me of condemnation.

May you carry this prayer with you this week,

knowing that with every breath you breathe,
you are blessed and sustained by Love
who journeys with us in light and in darkness.

Amen.

<Benediction written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, October 2023 and posted on
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/depths-of-love/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/fourth-sunday-in-lent-year-b-liturgical-resources>>