

March 14, 2021 Fourth Sunday in Lent ~ Service of Word and Prayer

We are using parts of the Service of the Word liturgy this morning, from your green hymn book, the Lutheran Book of Worship, page 126. The prayers are based on Sundays & Seasons. Shut off all the distractions in your home. Enjoy the quiet for a bit – take in some deep breaths. Light your candle. May your family be blessed in this time together.

The Gathering

Greeting: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God.

Hymn: LBW 479 - ELW 759 - My Faith Looks Up to Thee

God has made us his people through our Baptism into Christ. Living together in trust and hope, we confess our faith.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.*
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Lord be with you ~ and also with you.

Prayer of the day: O God, rich in mercy, by the humiliation of your Son you lifted up this fallen world and rescued us from the hopelessness of death. Lead us into your light, that all our deeds may reflect your love, through Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen

The Word

The Old Testament lesson is from **Numbers 21: 4-9**

Psalms 107:1-3, 17-22 found on page 267

The New Testament lesson is from **Ephesians 2:1-10**

Please rise for the gospel lesson. ***Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.***

It is helpful to read John 3:1-13 which tells of Nicodemus visiting Jesus.

Today's gospel reveals the end of their discourse.

Gospel: John 3:14-21 Sermon: Pastor Norine

Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. There is something about the darkness. Under the cover of night, couples kiss, children cozy up to their parents; the pace of life slows when the sun goes down. Under the cover of darkness, other things happen. Burglars are active and vandals vandalize, and things do go bump in the night. I remember my dad telling me countless times; "be home before midnight; nothing good happens after midnight".

The public ministry of Jesus was just getting off the ground. Already he was creating quite a stir among people. He had turned water into wine at a wedding reception – the first of many miracles. He has just tipped over the table of moneychangers in the temple, while he is visiting the holy city of Jerusalem.

A man, Nicodemus, comes to him under the cover of darkness to talk to Jesus. He wasn't just any man! He was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish religious and civil court called the Sanhedrin. They created and enforced the religious rules, and punished people for breaking them. God help those who got in their way, because their persecution was brutal. And Jesus got in their way. As we make our way to

Good Friday and the reason Jesus had to die, one of the reasons was that Jesus got in the way of the religious right of his day and they didn't like it.

So it was Nicodemus, a leader of these rigid Pharisees, who came to Jesus at night, so that no one would see him, because Nicodemus was curious about Jesus! "Rabbi, we know that you come from God as a teacher, for no one could perform these signs you do unless God were with him." Nicodemus said WE! That was a huge comment. Apparently Nicodemus was not alone in his curiosity. Apparently other Pharisees spoke in whispered voices late at night too about the impact Jesus was having. It seems that they also considered the possibility that Jesus was God's Son. By day they argued, attacked, condemned and ridiculed every action of Jesus. But, by night they wondered if he just might be the messiah!

The conversation rushed on when Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again. Nicodemus wondering how he could be "born" a second time. Jesus countering with the thought that a person must have a physical birth and a spiritual birth. Nicodemus not comprehending how this could possibly be. Finally, Jesus is astonished that Nicodemus—even though he is supposed to be an expert at these things does not grasp the most elementary of religious truths.

Then Jesus offers Nicodemus the greatest gift that he would ever receive. He said this: *"for God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him will not die, but will live forever."* All we need to know about God, Jesus and us is captured in that single verse. Martin Luther called it "the gospel in miniature".

All of his life, Nicodemus perceived God to be a harsh judge, a demanding taskmaster. One who must be appeased with animal sacrifices, perfect obedience, and rules. But in this late night conversation, for the first time in his life; God is described as one who loves, who forgives and who welcomes sinners home. It changed Nicodemus life forever.

We catch up with Nicodemus again, on Good Friday. He and another secret follower named Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus body down from the cross, embalm him in spices, and lovingly lay him in a tomb. Nicodemus risked his status, his reputation, and his very life, all because of a conversation one night in the darkness.

Perhaps we have all had Nicodemus moments when we ask ourselves -How can God love me? Will God reject me when my faith slides sideways? Does God mind the days when I have doubts?

Shhhhhhhhh. There is something about the darkness. The pace of life slows when the sun goes down, so that we might take time to consider the most important truths of life. That is the free gift of grace, and all that is required - is that we believe it. The 4 verbs in that verse make the message simpler yet. God loves. God gave. We believe. We have life. Beginning of the story. Thanks be to God. Amen

Hymn: WOV 776 & ELW 793 - Be Thou My Vision .

Our Response

OFFERING PRAYER

Gracious God, receive our gifts as you receive us. You walk beside us and you meet us in hunger with bread from heaven. Nourish us anew in your tender care, and empower us in faithful service to tend to others with this same love, through Jesus Christ our saving grace. **Amen.**

Prayers of the People by Maureen Rueckwald

Relying on the promises of God, we pray boldly for the church, the world, and all in need. *A brief silence.*

You sent your Son that the world might be saved through him. Inspire the witness of the church throughout the world. Empower missionaries, Bible translators, and ministries of service in your name. Bless our partners in ministry. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

From east to west your steadfast love is shown. Nourish seas and deserts, wilderness areas and cities. Give water to thirsty lands; nurture spring growth that feeds hungry creatures; bless farmers as they prepare for the growing season. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

You sustained your people in the wilderness. Give courage to all who lead in times of crisis and scarce resources. Prosper the work of those who aid victims of famine and drought. Bring peace in places where scarce resources cause violence. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Your mercy endures forever. Deliver all who cry to you, especially those who are hungry or without homes. Give life in places where death seems triumphant; give

healing to those who are sick and comfort to those who mourn. Hear us, O God.
Your mercy is great.

By grace we have been saved. Fill this congregation to overflowing with that grace, that we show mercy to others. Nourish any in our midst who are hungry, especially children, and bless our ministries of feeding and shelter. Give us patience and courage when the way seems long. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Your Son was lifted up that whoever believes might have eternal life. We praise you for all who have died in Christ. Bring us with all the saints into the fullness of your promises. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

We entrust ourselves and all our prayers to you, O faithful God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The peace of Christ be with you always and also with you.

Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, let us 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 trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever and ever. Amen.

Hymn: LBW 469 & ELW 765 – Lord of All Hopefulness

Benediction

May God the creator strengthen you; Jesus the beloved fill you; and the Holy Spirit the comforter keep you in peace. Amen.

Dismissal Go in peace. Be the light of Christ.

Thanks be to God.