

## CALL TO WORSHIP:

*Let us give thanks to God for his unfailing love  
and his wonderful deeds for humanity!*

*Let us offer to him sacrifices of thanksgiving,  
and tell of his works with songs of joy!*

Let us worship God.

(Psalm 107.21-22, ad.)

**HYMN:** Sweet is the solemn voice ...

## PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty, holy, and loving God:

In the midst of our Lenten journey of self-examination and personal renewal, we remember with gratitude your covenant of love, revealed to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We thank you that it is not your desire to condemn us for our sin; and that you have acted instead to save us from the consequences of our sin, by sending Jesus into the world.

We confess, however, that sin continues to be part of our lives, in spite of our faith in Jesus and our love for you. We confess that we continue to do things that are wrong, even though we know better — at times without intending to, and at other times quite deliberately. We find it difficult to live in your ways, and at times we even stop trying to. We are quick to notice and criticize the faults of others, but we are much slower to see and deal with our own faults.

Merciful God: Once again we ask your forgiveness, through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus. Help us once more to set our feet on the path that leads to you and to eternal life. May we be conscious of the Holy Spirit's presence with us; and, responding to his promptings, may we produce his fruit in ever-greater abundance.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

*Our Father, which art in heaven:*

*Hallowed be thy name.*

*Thy kingdom come.*

*Thy will be done in earth,  
as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day 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,  
for ever. Amen.*

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

**ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:**

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*God loved the world so much*

*that he gave his only Son,*

*so that whoever believes in him may not perish,*

*but have eternal life.*

*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,*

*but to save the world through him.*

(John 3.16-17)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,  
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

**SCRIPTURE READINGS:****- Old Testament Reading:** Numbers 21.4-9 - The bronze snake

This reading is a story from the time of the Exodus, when the people of Israel were traveling from Egypt to the Promised Land.

The Israelites often complained about the hardships they experienced in the wilderness, and this story is one such “complaint story”.

**- Psalm: Psalm 107.1-9, 17-22** - “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good!”

Psalm 107 is a psalm of thanksgiving.

It tells four brief stories in which God comes to the aid of people in trouble, even if they have brought that trouble on themselves.

The portion we’re reading today consists of the *first* and *third* of those four stories.

Notice how they both follow the same *pattern*: people find themselves in distress, they cry to God for help, and God saves them. This pattern is similar to the sequence of events that we saw in today’s Old Testament reading.

**- Letter Reading:** Ephesians 2.1-10 - Saved by grace, through faith

In this reading, Paul speaks of the difference that faith in Jesus has made in the lives of his readers.

Those readers were mainly Gentiles, who previously had worshiped Greek and Roman gods.

**- Gospel Reading:** John 3.14-21 - “God loved the world so much ...”

This reading is part of a larger passage that begins with a conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is mentioned only in the *early* part of the story, however, and isn’t mentioned at all in today’s reading.

The reading contains the famous verse, “John 3.16”.

**HYMN:** You are my all in all

**SERMON:** “From Death to Life”

The lectionary readings for each Sunday don’t always have a theme in common, which means that, in preparing a sermon, I often have to choose just one or two of the readings to focus on, and essentially ignore the others.

Today, however, there is a theme that’s common to all four scripture readings, including the psalm. That theme is “from death to life”. Each of the readings speaks of God’s rescuing people from either potential death or actual death, and giving them life.

Today’s psalm, for example tells two stories in which people in danger of dying cry out to God, who then rescues them, preserving their lives. The first story is of people lost in the wilderness, who were in danger of starving to death. When they cried out to God, says the psalm writer, God rescued them; specifically, *He led them by a straight way / to a city where they could settle* (Psalm 107.7).

The people in the other story were apparently the victims of some kind of *disease*. The writer says, *They loathed all food, / and drew near to the gates of death* (Psalm 107.18). They too cried out to God in their distress, and God rescued them also. Says the writer: *He sent out his word and healed them; / he rescued them from the grave* (Psalm 107.20).

The psalm contains two additional stories, which we omitted, in which God also rescues people in desperate situations. Each of those four stories is structured in the same way; and each one concludes with a call to give thanks to God, in these words: *Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love / and his wonderful deeds for mankind!* (Psalm 107.8, 15, 21, 31).

“From death to life”: in love, God rescues each group of people from possible death, and preserves their lives.

Today’s Old Testament reading tells a similar story involving the people of Israel as a whole, as they were making their way to the Promised Land.

Last Sunday, we read the story of the report of Moses’ twelve scouts, whom he had sent into the land of Canaan to explore the territory that the Israelites were to invade and occupy. As we heard last week, the scouts’ “majority report” was that the people of Canaan were too strong for the Israelites to take on; and so the Israelites were afraid to enter the land. As a result, God decreed that they would have to stay in the wilderness for forty years, until the generation of those who had come out of Egypt had all died. The next generation, then, would take on the task of invading and occupying the land.

The Israelites spent most of those forty years encamped at a place in the wilderness called Kadesh Barnea, to the south of Canaan. But, by the time we come to today’s reading, the forty years are up, and the Israelites are once again on the move.

However, this generation of Israelites, like their parents, also is inclined to gripe about the hardships of living in the wilderness. In today's reading, they complain about the lack of food and water, just as their parents had done years before. And worse than that, they complain even about the food that God has miraculously been providing all these years — the manna. They say, *We detest this miserable food!* (Numbers 21.5). They're tired of eating the same food day after day!

When God then sends venomous snakes among them, which cause the death of many people, the people realize they were wrong to speak against God; and they ask Moses to ask God to get rid of the snakes. God, however, chooses a different remedy. Rather than taking the snakes away, he instructs Moses to make a snake out of bronze, put it up on a pole, and instruct anyone bitten by a venomous snake to look at the bronze snake. That action would keep them from dying from the snake venom. In other words, God doesn't remove the hazard, but rather provides a remedy that prevents any more people from dying.

“From death to life”: it's not that the people who had died from snakebite are brought back to life; but rather, that others bitten by the snakes now have something they can do to avoid what otherwise would be certain death.

In today's reading from the Letters, the apostle Paul tells his readers in Ephesus, *you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient* (Ephesians 2.1-2). However, Paul tells them, they are not “dead” any longer. He says, *But, because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved* (Ephesians 2.4-5).

What Paul is talking about is their conversion from being worshipers of Greek and Roman gods to being worshipers of the God of Israel, and believers in Jesus Christ. He doesn't mean that they were literally dead, of course; but rather, that, prior to their conversion, they were on their way to being irreversibly dead, with no hope of resurrection to eternal life. This was because, like all human beings, they were sinful by nature. As Paul puts it, *we were by nature deserving of wrath* (Ephesians 2.3) — that is, God's wrath.

Paul makes it clear that is *God* who has taken the initiative in moving his readers from death to life. To repeat, what he says is, *because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved* (Ephesians 2.4-5).

Let's focus on some key words in these two verses. First, there's the word “mercy”. Mercy means not to treat someone as harshly as they deserve to be treated. “God is rich in mercy”, Paul says.

Then there's the word “grace”. Grace means undeserved kindness; or to put it another way, grace means to treat someone better than they deserve to be treated. In other words, “grace” means essentially the same thing as “mercy”. The difference between the two is like the differ-

ence between saying that a glass is half *full* or half *empty*. “It is by grace that you have been saved,” Paul says — God’s grace, that is. He could just as easily have said “it is by mercy that you have been saved”.

So, why is God gracious or merciful? *Because of his great love for us*, Paul says (Ephesians 2.4). And there’s the third key word: “love”. God’s grace and mercy — God’s action in “making us alive with Christ” — is motivated by his great love for us. Here we hear echoes of today’s psalm: *Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love / and his wonderful deeds for mankind!* (Psalm 107.8, 21). God’s motivation for being gracious or merciful to us human beings, then, is his *love* — *his great love for us* (Ephesians 2.4), as Paul puts it.

Paul uses the word grace again a few verses later, when he says, *it is by grace you have been saved, through faith* — *and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God* — *not by works, so that no one can boast* (Ephesians 2.8-9). That brings us to a fourth key word: “gift”. “To make us alive with Christ when we were dead in transgressions” is a gift that God graciously offers us; it’s not something we can accomplish on our own, or that we can earn by good behavior.

But, like any gift, it doesn’t do us any good unless we accept it. And how do we accept this gift? Through “faith” — the fifth key word. Faith, of course, means to accept that something is true without knowing so for sure. Faith in this case means accepting the message that, through Jesus’ death on the cross, God offers us forgiveness of our sin, reconciliation with himself, adoption into his family, and resurrection from death to eternal life. Faith means accepting and believing that God graciously offers to “make us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions”. God’s gracious offer doesn’t do us any good, though, unless we accept it; unless we believe it; unless we show openness and receptiveness to God.

Thinking back to today’s Old Testament story, God provided the people of Israel with a remedy for the bite of the venomous snakes — the bronze snake on the pole. But that remedy didn’t help them unless they looked at the bronze snake. If they refused to look at the bronze snake, they would presumably die from the snake venom, just like those who had died before God had provided the remedy.

The necessary human response to God’s grace, then, is faith. By accepting, by believing, by being receptive to what God graciously offers us, we receive what God offers us. Paul put it so well when he said, *it is by grace you have been saved, through faith* (Ephesians 2.8) — God’s grace; our faith.

And to emphasize the point, Paul adds, *this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God* — *not by works, so that no one can boast* (Ephesians 2.9). There’s key word number six: “works” — or if we prefer, “deeds”, or “actions”. What Paul emphasizes here is that making us alive — moving us from death to life — is God’s doing, not our own. We can not accomplish it by anything we do; neither can we earn it by doing good deeds in order to “score points” with God.

Nevertheless, “works”, “deeds”, or “actions” are important; for in the next verse — the final verse of today’s reading — Paul says, *we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do*

*good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Ephesians 2.10). Doing good deeds shouldn't be seen as a way to earn God's favor, but rather as a way to express our gratitude to God for graciously "making us alive with Christ".

Finally, we come to today's Gospel reading, in which, once more, we find the theme "from death to life". The life that is spoken of in this passage is called specifically "*eternal life*".

As I've mentioned in today's Announcements Sheet, there is a difference of opinion among Bible scholars as to whether the words in this passage are all the words of Jesus, or whether part of the passage is followup commentary by John, the writer of this Gospel. The version of the Bible that I happen to work with regards verse 15 as the end of Jesus' speech, and verses 16 to 21 as further theological reflection by John; so that's the view that I'm taking in discussing this passage.

The first two verses of this passage, then, are the conclusion of Jesus' speech to Nicodemus the Pharisee; and in these two verses, Jesus sees a parallel between the bronze snake incident and his own impending crucifixion. He says, *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life* (John 3.14-15). In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the term "lifted up" to refer to his crucifixion. What he means, then, is that, just as those who looked at Moses' bronze snake were saved from death, his crucifixion will have positive consequences for everyone who believes in him — that is, they will receive eternal life.

This is spelled out further in John's comments in the famous verse 16 and the verses that follow. John says, *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son* (John 3.16-18). As Paul does in today's reading from the Letters, John emphasizes that God has taken the initiative, and that God's action was motivated by love for human beings — "God loved the world". John doesn't use the words "mercy" or "grace" here, but the concept is clearly there, since in John's Gospel, the term "the world" normally refers to sinful human beings — human beings who are opposed to God and God's purposes. God's sending his Son into the world, then, is clearly a gracious act — something better than what we human beings deserve.

John also emphasizes the importance of faith, as he does throughout his Gospel. For John, to "believe in Jesus" means to accept that Jesus is more than just a wise rabbi, and more than just a prophet, even — that he is, in fact, Israel's long-awaited Messiah, and also the Son of God. To believe this is to be receptive to God, which is the attitude that God wants us human beings to have. *Not* to believe in Jesus, then, means to be *unreceptive* to God.

We are judged, then, on the basis of our receptiveness or unreceptiveness to God. Jesus has come into the world as light, John says, and that light reveals everyone's true character; for we

either hide from the light or come into the light, depending on whether we “do evil” or “live by the truth” (John 3.20-21). As John sees it, then, we are all worthy of God’s condemnation; but, by believing in Jesus, God gives us the opportunity to escape that condemnation, and receive eternal life instead. This corresponds to what Paul says to his readers about once having been dead in their sins, but now having been made alive by God.

“From death to life” is the theme that runs through all four of today’s scripture readings. The two Old Testament readings both tell stories in which God rescues people from possible death, and keeps them alive. And in the two New Testament readings, the writers speak of how, by sending Jesus into the world, God has given us human beings the opportunity to survive our own eventual death, and to be raised to new, eternal life, just as he raised Jesus.

This is, of course, a very familiar message, but it’s an important one for us to hear again in this season of *Lent*, as we prepare to commemorate Jesus’ death, and to celebrate his resurrection.

**HYMN:** As when the Hebrew prophet raised ...

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:**

Loving and gracious God:

We do indeed give thanks to you for your unfailing love, and your wonderful deeds for us human beings! We thank you for making yourself known to us through the experiences of the ancient Israelites, and especially, through the person and work of Jesus, your Son. We praise you that you are a God of love as well as a God of righteousness; a God of grace as well as a God of justice. We thank you in particular today for your patience with us sinful human beings, and for generously offering us a remedy for our sin through the sacrificial death of Jesus, making it possible for us, who would otherwise be dead in our sin, to be reconciled to you, to be adopted into your family, and to receive eternal life.

Enable us, we pray, to believe in Jesus, and to continue believing in him, in spite of voices all around us that try to dissuade us. Enable us also to show our gratitude by living in your ways, especially in this season of Lent, as we prepare to commemorate Jesus’ death and celebrate his resurrection.

Hear our prayers for your church throughout the world, that it may faithfully represent you to the world, and be a community that truly embodies the values of your kingdom. Help us, its members, to take our cues from you, rather than from our sinful nature or from the ways of the world around us. May we not be afraid to be distinct or to stand out, as we seek to live in your ways and to serve you.

We thank you for the many ways in which you look after us from day to day — for providing the necessities of life, and for strengthening and guiding us as we face the challenges each day

brings. Hear our prayers for members of our congregation, and others close to us, who are experiencing difficulties of various kinds, especially those we now name before you: \_\_\_\_\_ . God of compassion, you know each one's needs, and we pray that you would graciously provide for their needs, so that they may be sustained, strengthened, and healed.

We pray also for the needs of the wider world. As we pray for people in positions of leadership and authority, we pray in particular today for efforts to deal decisively with the harassment and abusive treatment of women in the workplace, particularly within the military and within police forces all across the country. Give wisdom and courage to our political leaders, we pray, that they may deal effectively with this issue, and create a safe and respectful work environment for women in every workplace. We pray also for women in *leadership* positions, that they may be treated with respect and consideration, particularly by their male colleagues and subordinates.

We continue to pray for our struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic. We thank you for the progress that has been made in the past year in understanding the virus, in treating those who become infected, and in developing effective vaccines. We give thanks also for financial assistance that governments have provided to individuals, businesses, and charities, to help them weather the financial difficulties the pandemic has caused. We give thanks that vaccines are becoming available in greater quantities, and we pray for your guidance and blessing on the effort to vaccinate as many people as possible, as soon as possible.

We pray also that lessons may be learned from this traumatic experience that will help us to be better prepared for epidemics and pandemics that will occur in the future, and that we may not find ourselves repeating the same mistakes. Especially, we pray for a reform of our long-term care system, so that frail elderly people may be treated with dignity and respect; and so that those who *work* in long-term care may receive adequate wages and recognition for the important service they provide.

We thank you that you *hear* our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them *up* to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**HYMN:** Simply trusting ev'ry day ...

### **COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:**

Brothers and sisters in Christ:  
Go into the week ahead now,  
in peace,  
and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,  
to continue living as people of faith  
and people who belong to the light.



And may God bless you:  
May he confirm and strengthen your faith,  
and may he continue to empower you to live in his ways;  
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.