

## Dance into the Light

Summerlea U.C.  
Rev. Scott A. Patton  
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Numbers 21:4-9  
Ephesians 2:1-10  
John 3:14-21

### The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

Prayer:

God of love, as we gather in this time of worship, we open our hearts and our minds to hear the words you would have us hear.

Hold us in the mystery of your self-giving love;

help us to see through the Lenten passion and suffering of Jesus

to the new life you offer us in the future day of hope and resurrection.

And now, may the words of my mouth... Amen.

Easter Sunday has traditionally been a time when new members are received into the church, and so, part of the role of the season of Lent is one of "preparation." Those who have expressed a desire to become full members of the church would spend some time during Lent preparing themselves by learning about what it means to be a follower of Christ, and hence, what it means to be part of the body of Christ in the world, which is the church.

Of course, the point I've been trying to make all through the season of Lent is that this opportunity exists, not only for those who are about to become members of the church, but also for those of us who have been around for a while and who might need to RE-commit ourselves to the church and to being followers of Christ.

That is why Lent is sometimes a difficult and challenging experience: if we take it seriously, it forces us to acknowledge that, so often, our commitment becomes complacency, our faithfulness becomes faltering, and our dedicated discipleship becomes derailed.

But I want to tell you about a little girl who spent some time during Lent preparing to join the church on Easter Sunday. She studied diligently, she learned the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, she listened carefully to what the minister had to say (which is always a key element!), and finally, on Easter Sunday, she was welcomed into membership in the church.

She knew that God loved her, and she wanted to be part of that group of people who are committed to living the way of God's love. After the service, her parents put on a special meal at home, and invited the relatives over. And the little girl was so happy that, after the meal was over, she was singing and dancing around the house in a very joyful spirit.

Her grandfather, with a look of disdain and disapproval on his face, stopped her and scolded her. “How could you dance around like that on the Lord’s day, especially after having just joined the church? Do you have no respect?”

The girl felt sad because of this, and went out into the yard on the farm where they lived. She went over to the corral by the barn where an old mule was penned in, warming himself in the spring sunshine. The old mule’s ears hung down, and he almost seemed to be frowning. The little girl looked at the mule and said, “you must have the same religion as granddad.”

Unfortunately, this is what the experience of Lent, or even of being part of the church, is like for some people. Admittedly, part of the season of Lent has to do with things that are not pleasant and happy, but we are called to visit, or get in touch with, this side of ourselves during Lent, not to make it a way of life. That is why, traditionally, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent is called Laetare Sunday, the word “Laetare” being the first word in the Latin Mass, meaning “rejoice!”

If we’ve been doing what we are meant to be doing during this season of Lent, we will have been openly acknowledging and coming to terms with the fact that our humanity sometimes gets in the way of our attempts to be faithful, and seems inevitably to steer us off course. This is part of the reality of human sinfulness, and if we fail to take this seriously, or if we fail to admit this reality, we are only deluding ourselves.

At the same time, to live perpetually with this reality hanging over our heads can be equally destructive. That’s why today is about rejoicing. God has given us a way to look seriously at our sinful side and not lose hope. What we have been unable to do on our own, God has already done for us. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians described us as being “dead through our trespasses,” our trespasses being the result of turning from God’s ways. The writer also affirms that, by God’s grace, God has “made us alive together with Christ, and raised us up with him.”

It’s no wonder that part of our gospel reading today has become so familiar and is so often quoted. Just watch any football game on TV, and when the camera focuses on the crowds in the stands, you will eventually see someone holding up a big sign bearing the inscription “John 3:16.” My own personal wish is that they would hold up signs saying “John 3:16 and 17.” The first part is very familiar: “For God so loved the world that he that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” But I think it’s equally important to hear the

second part: “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.”

This is why we rejoice today. In spite of our disobedience, in spite of the fact that we know God’s ways but haven’t yet found a way to really live them, God has found a way to overcome that problem, and to overcome the barrier between us and God that we ourselves have erected.

And all this simply because God loves us. And, in loving us, God also knows us. God knows that, left on our own, we will likely turn from God’s ways to follow our own ways. And that is about as simple a theological statement as I can make. God knows we will mess up, but God wants for us so much more than messed up lives, and so, God provides the means whereby we are healed.

Now, the astute listener might be saying by now, “well, I like this God a lot better than the God who sent in poisonous snakes when the people were disobedient!” Of course, we’re not talking about two different Gods here, so how do we explain the snakes? The shortest and most honest answer to that question that I can give you is “I don’t know.” Neither do I know why good people get sick and die, or why a tornado or earthquake or flood comes along and brings with it so much destruction. I can’t even begin to guess why the world was created with these realities as part of it.

What I DO know is that people throughout history have been quick to conclude that it must be God’s punishment. But to be honest with you, I can’t reconcile the God of great love and compassion that John tells us about with the God who punishes with poisonous snakes. So, maybe the snakes were there anyway, and the people, in their guilt, concluded that it must be God’s doing.

I can’t offer any explanation for why God created poisonous snakes in the first place, and it seems clear that God wasn’t going to intervene and actively prevent people from being bitten. What God DOES do, though, is provide the means for healing.

What I can see very clearly is that all of today’s scripture readings show that God offers us healing from that which we most fear.

The Israelites in the desert feared the poisonous snakes, which for them were a symbol of evil, deceit, and death. Moses fashioned the image of a snake out of bronze, and lifted it up on his staff, and all who looked upon it would be healed. Jesus proved to be a threat to both the religious and

political establishment of his day, and in this sense, he was feared every bit as much as the snakes were in the desert.

Because of this, Jesus was also “lifted up” in the crucifixion, and all who “look upon” this Christ who was lifted up will also find healing. As people of faith – especially, I think, during the season of Lent – our own fears are sometimes brought to the surface. Many would rather forego the Lenten journey, mostly because of the fear that is often inherent in looking openly and honestly at ourselves and the lives we live.

John’s gospel refers to Jesus as the light that has come into the world. We all know that you cannot turn on a light in a room without also creating shadows.

A big part of what we fear most is the “shadow side” of ourselves and the world in which we live. Whether it be fear of God’s judgment, fear of the forces of evil, fear of circumstances beyond our control – whatever our fear may be, we are called to offer up that fear to God, and in God, to find the source of healing and new life.

The source of healing for the Israelites was to look upon an image of that which caused their fear, not to avoid looking at it. In the same way, we must look at and acknowledge our own fears in order to find healing.

During Lent, we dare to face that part of our lives of faith that we fear most: that the light of Christ will expose us as the people we really are, and bring judgment upon us. On this particular day, we “rejoice” because God’s great love for us has provided the means by which we are healed.

And this gives us reason to dance into the light, following the example of the little girl who could not contain her joy at having joined that group of people who know and celebrate God’s love for us all. Despite the stern rebuke from her grandfather, who probably quite literally had “the fear of God” put into him, she found a way to express her joy over the God of love she had come to know, and she came to know the joy of being welcomed with open arms into the community of God’s beloved people. On this Laetare Sunday, we too are called to rejoice, because God has healed us and set us free to live without fear.

Thanks be to God. Amen.