



**GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH**

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**Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 14, 2021  
ELW Holy Communion, Setting Three**

The fourth of the Old Testament promises providing a baptismal lens this Lent is the promise God makes to Moses: those who look on the bronze serpent will live. In today's gospel Jesus says he will be lifted up on the cross like the serpent, so that those who look to him in faith will live. When we receive the sign of the cross in baptism, that cross becomes the sign we can look to in faith for healing, for restored relationship to God, for hope when we are dying.

A warm welcome to those who are here worshipping on-line with us today! Here at Grace Lutheran we believe God is active in your life. Even you being here now is testament of God's calling and leading in your heart, which you have faithfully heeded. So we welcome you, and pray that today you will be nurtured and that the gifts that God has graciously given you will be stirred for the sake of God's mission in the world.

## GATHERING

### ANNOUNCEMENTS

#### THANKSGIVING FOR BAPTISM

We gather together while apart in the boldness of Christ, with the face of God shining in and through us by the power of the Spirit.

And in our gathering and by God's bold grace and mercy, we give thanks for the gift of baptism. This is a gift that brings us into God's kingdom. This is a gift that reminds us of God's real presence among us. This is a gift that goes beyond our understanding but yet strengthens us as witnesses of God's love freely given.

So for those of you with water in front of you, you may dip your fingers into the cool, refreshing liquid. Feel God with you. Sense God emboldening you. Know God's love for you. And when you're ready, use the water to make a sign of the cross on your forehead. Be rejuvenated by this gracious gift. Be blessed by God's grace and mercy. Be filled by the power of the Spirit, reforming you as God's people.

**Amen. Thanks be to God.**

**GATHERING HYMN:** The Church's One Foundation (#654)

#### GREETING

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

**And also with you.**

**KYRIE** (p. 138)

#### PRAYER OF THE DAY

Almighty God, it is through Jesus that you are seen in the world. Not to condemn us, but to save us from our shortcomings, our shame, and our fears. Give us the courage and strength to uphold our faith, that we might boldly act as your own beloved children, welcoming all into your kingdom as you welcome us, through the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

## WORD

#### FIRST READING: Numbers 21:4-9

A reading from Numbers.

*Though God provides food and water for the Israelites in the wilderness, they whine and grumble. They forget about the salvation they experienced in the exodus. God punishes them for their sin, but when they repent God also provides a means of healing: a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole.*

<sup>4</sup>From Mount Hor [the Israelites] set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup>The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." <sup>6</sup>Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup>The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to

the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” <sup>9</sup>So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

**PSALM: Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

<sup>1</sup>Give thanks to the LORD, for the LORD is good,  
for God’s mercy endures forever.

<sup>2</sup>**Let the redeemed of the LORD proclaim  
that God redeemed them from the hand of the foe,**

<sup>3</sup>gathering them in from the lands;  
from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

<sup>17</sup>**Some were fools and took rebellious paths;  
through their sins they were afflicted.**

<sup>18</sup>They loathed all manner of food  
and drew near to death’s door.

<sup>19</sup>**Then in their trouble they cried to the LORD  
and you delivered them from their distress.**

<sup>20</sup>You sent forth your word and healed them  
and rescued them from the grave.

<sup>21</sup>**Let them give thanks to you, LORD, for your steadfast love  
and your wonderful works for all people.**

<sup>22</sup>Let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving  
and tell of your deeds with shouts of joy.

**SECOND READING: Ephesians 2:1-10**

A reading from Ephesians.

*While we were dead in our sinfulness, God acted to make us alive as a gift of grace in Christ Jesus. We are saved not by what we do but by grace through faith. Thus our good works are really a reflection of God’s grace at work in our lives.*

<sup>1</sup>You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup>All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. <sup>4</sup>But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—<sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

## **GOSPEL ACCLAMATION (p. 142)**

### **GOSPEL: John 3:14-21**

The holy gospel according to John.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

*To explain the salvation of God to the religious leader, Nicodemus, Jesus refers to the scripture passage quoted in today's first reading. Just as those who looked upon the bronze serpent were healed, so people will be saved when they behold Christ lifted up on the cross.*

[Jesus said:] <sup>14</sup>"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>"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.

<sup>17</sup>"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. <sup>18</sup>Those 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. <sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But 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 gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

### **SERMON**

Almighty God, by the power of the Spirit, open your Word and illumine our darkened world, that we might see more clearly and live more faithfully by the light of your truth in Jesus Christ.  
**Amen.**

So, we made it. We're at the actual one-year mark of this pandemic. I know last week I talked about how a full liturgical year had already passed, and well, this week marks a full calendar year. And I'll be honest, I didn't think it'd last this long. I don't know if anyone did, not at first at least. But here we are. A whole year of this.

And... there have been mixed reviews but I'd say on the most part, it's been difficult. We had to adjust to a lot of change, we had to get used to different rules and regulations, and we had to learn to rely on technology and the internet in ways we might not have thought we ever would. It's been hard to pretty much rewrite our daily routines, our usual ins and outs, and what we've grown accustomed to over the span of our lives. We had to just accept the fact that we won't be able to see each other, at least, without a mask covering half our faces, or be able to physically shake each other's hand, or be able to just spend time with each other and hang out like the days of old. It's been a long year to say the least. A very difficult year. And unfortunately to many, perhaps even a traumatic year.

To top it off, I read this article a few days ago talking about how these scientists have concluded that this pandemic is actually at the fault of humans in general. Their conclusion came as no

surprise to them, as they actually were able to predict this pandemic a while ago from observing human behaviour and our respect, or lack thereof, toward nature and the planet and the animal kingdom. Of course, we want to put the blame of this particular virus on those who allegedly ate the bat that allegedly had the virus that allegedly passed it onto people. But this isn't the first time that a disease or virus was passed onto us by an animal. This isn't the first time that people have decided that the world and nature are for their own pleasure and disposal. This isn't the first time that the consequence of our poor decisions snuck up on us and bit us right where we didn't really want to be bit.

But you know what, that is essentially what happened to the Israelites in today's first lesson. I mean, they didn't go a year without seeing each other in person, but they have to face the consequences of their actions. See after they were freed from centuries of slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the desert for up to 40 years trying to get into the Promised Land. What did they do with their time? They complained. They complained about wandering in the wilderness. They complained that they weren't taken care of like they were when they were slaves. They complained about the free food that they received from God, because it somehow didn't live up to their Michelin star standards that they were used to in Egypt. Now I admit that I've never been a slave before, but I can't imagine the food to be that great.

And so in response to and as a consequence of their endless complaining, these poisonous snakes show up and start biting them and killing them. It got so bad that the Israelites admitted their wrong and asked God for help and in a sheer act of almost comedic irony, God tells Moses to make a statue of snake that the Israelites could look at to be cured.

Now, I've never been bitten by a snake before either, but I would imagine that being bit, especially by a poisonous snake that has the potential to kill you, would be somewhat traumatic. So the last thing I'd want to help me get better from the snake bite would be another snake. That is kind of like healing a burn with fire, waging a war for peace, or using a knife to pry out the first knife that has somehow been lodged into your leg. But that's what God said to do and what Moses did, and believe it or not, it worked. All who looked up at the snake in belief that it'll heal them were in fact, healed.

I know, sounds weird. Could you imagine if something like that happened today? Can you imagine being healed from some sort of trauma just by looking at the object of that trauma? Or being absolved from the guilt of our imperfection by looking at and admitting to our bad decisions? Or being forgiven of our sin just by looking at the consequence of our wrongful actions?

It sounds like it might be easy, but I wonder if it really is. I mean who among us is totally ready to admit our wrongs? We talked about this a few weeks ago, we're really good at admitting everyone else's wrongs, but our own? That's a bit more difficult. How many of us can openly accept that our guilt is from something of our own doing and our own fault? Sure, that is technically the definition of guilt, but don't we like to place that blame on others instead? Are there any of us who would be able to honestly confess our sin, point to the part that we play in the demise of humanity and ourselves, and fully own up to the ways that we are flawed, broken, and in desperate need of a Saviour?

Not easy, is it? It isn't easy to admit that our poor decisions could have lasting negative consequences. It isn't easy to perhaps try to fathom that this pandemic could be our collective fault. It isn't easy to fully grasp how it was our sinfulness that nailed Jesus on that cross.

Our sinfulness of falling intoxicated with power. Our sinfulness of exercising imbalanced authority over others. Our sinfulness of denying any fault of our own that might need correction, rectifying, or forgiveness.

And in a sheer act of almost comedic irony, the cross shifts from a symbol of condemnation, shame, and death to a symbol of our redemption, salvation, and God's grace for us. So as Jesus told the Pharisee Nicodemus that he, just like the serpent in the desert, will be lifted up above our guilt, above our shame, and above our sin to reveal to all just how powerful God's love is for us all. But this isn't an act of condemnation as we might think, this isn't to drive the nails of our shame deeper into our hearts, this isn't to allow us to die under the weight of the consequence of our actions, rather it is an act that brings us to our redemption in God's mercy, it is a display of the salvation that we receive by God's love, it is mark of God's grace in our lives, lifting *us* above our guilt, above our shame, and above our sin as we are declared God's beloved children forever.

Yes, our actions have consequences. Negative ones, in fact. But God shows us time and again that even in the guilt of bad decisions, there is healing. Even in the shame of our imperfection and fallenness, there is wholeness. Even in the sinful nature of our selfishness and denial, there is forgiveness. So while we can barely even admit that we are sinners, there is the cross reminding us of the consequences of our actions and also the gracious forgiveness that God gives in spite of them.

This isn't to give us an excuse to commit any evil imaginable, but it is to remind us that our position in God's family and love cannot be changed by what we do or what we fail to do. But it is dependant solely on God's grace and mercy, inviting and welcoming us into God's kingdom, holding us dear and feeding and strengthening us with God's own Word of love.

And so as the Israelites were healed by looking to the serpent that caused them the pain as a consequence of their own actions, so we look to the cross where the Messiah hung because of our actions to be reminded of the grace that came in spite of the negative repercussions, the forgiveness that came in spite of the sin, the love that came in spite of our inability to see our own selfishness, pride, and evil. No, this isn't an excuse to commit evil, but it is a reminder that even in the face of evil, God continues to be merciful and loves us into redemption and salvation.

In this season of Lent, as we continue in our reflection and repentance, may we see our sin both collective and individual, that we might be able to put them at the foot of the cross and know God's grace, mercy, and love to the fullest degree as we accept God's forgiveness and salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.

**HYMN OF THE DAY:** Lift High the Cross (#660)

## CREED

With eyes fixed on the cross of Christ, let us confess the Christian faith with the Apostle's 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 catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

## PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Called to live in the confidence of faith, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need. Each petition will end with, "Emboldening God," and you are invited to respond with **hear our prayer**. Emboldening God, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, your goodness and mercy that endure forever. May we rely on this promise, that our faith be strengthened in gratitude and thanksgiving. Emboldening God, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, we are witnesses of your redemption, and we proclaim your grace and mercy to all the lands. Free us from our fears and anxieties in our ministry, that there be no limits to the reach of your message. We pray especially for our neighbouring faith communities; our partner Anglican Church of Canada; our bishop Greg, assistant to the bishop Kathy, and national bishop Susan; and our companion churches of the BC Synod. In particular, we pray for Faith Lutheran in Powell River and their Anglican interim pastor Paula Sampson; and for Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Prince George and their pastor Fleming Blishen. Emboldening God, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, your love is seen in all of creation, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. May your love be reciprocated in our care for this planet, and may we be mindful of what we are leaving behind for the future generations. Emboldening God, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, although we can be a rebellious people, you continue to deliver us from our distress. Impart your wisdom on all world leaders and politicians, that their governing of the world might be for the good of all. We offer a special prayer for Solyana Amanuel and Maekele Kiflu and Selam Haile and their children, that they might enter the safety of our country as refugees soon. Emboldening God, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, you send forth your word to us and you heal us from our afflictions and you save us from what ails us. Make this especially apparent among those of us who are sick, who mourn, or who feel lonely, that none of us forget your gracious promise. We pray especially for Bev and family; Beulah; Ron, Tess, and Mineko; Paula; Laura; Kandie; Thomas; Cindy; Linda; Henry; those who have contracted or been affected by COVID-19; and all those we name aloud or quietly in our hearts at this time...

Emboldening God, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, your love is steadfast and your works are wonderful for all people. Remind us of our connection to you and all the saints of the past and present, that our collective faith might increase in our proclamation of your Word and ministry of your gospel. Emboldening God, **hear our prayer.**

Into your hands, O God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your gracious love and mercy, found in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

## MEAL

### PEACE

The peace of Christ be with you always.

**And also with you.**

**OFFERTORY HYMN:** The Numberless Gifts of God's Mercies (#683)

### OFFERING PRAYER

Holy God, we give you thanks for all your wonderful works among us, blessing us with your love and welcoming us with your grace. May this food before us empower us to be for the world symbols of your unending mercy for us all, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

### DIALOGUE

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts.

**We lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

**It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

### PREFACE

It is indeed right, our duty and our joy,  
that we should at all times and in all places  
give thanks and praise to you, almighty and merciful God,  
through our Savior Jesus Christ;  
who strengthens us with your love and blesses us with your grace,  
joining us with all the choirs of angels,  
the church on earth and the hosts of heaven,  
in praising your name with this unending hymn:



## **HOLY, HOLY, HOLY (p. 144)**

### **THANKSGIVING AT THE TABLE**

O Lord we give thanks to you, for you are good and your mercy endures forever. We proclaim your gracious redemption to all the lands, strengthened by your deliverance from our rebellion and sin. And you have sent to us your Son Jesus, your very Word, to heal us and rescue us from the grave.

For on the night that he was betrayed, your Son Jesus sat with his friends where he took some bread, gave thanks, broke and shared it and said, "take and eat, this is my body broken for you, do this for the remembrance of me."

Then after they ate, he took the cup, gave thanks, and shared that saying, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me."

It is in this food given to us that we share that we see God's wonderful works and steadfast love, even as we proclaim this mystery of faith:

**Christ has died.**

**Christ is risen.**

**Christ will come again.**

O God, to you we give our thanksgiving. To you, we shout for joy. For all honour and praise are yours through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

### **LORD'S PRAYER**

Gathered in the boldness of the Spirit, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those  
who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours,  
now and forever. Amen.**

### **INVITATION TO COMMUNION**

Taste and see God's goodness and grace.

**Thanks be to God.**

## **COMMUNION**

**COMMUNION HYMN:** Lamb of God (p. 146)

### **PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION**

Merciful God, in your great compassion you have again fed us with heavenly food, nourishing our souls and strengthening our faith. May we look ahead into this season and pandemic with boldness, leaning on your strength and trusting in your love, through Jesus Christ our Saviour and Redeemer.

**Amen.**

## **SENDING**

### **BLESSING**

May the love of God the Creator,  
the grace of God the Christ,  
and the light of God the Counsellor  
bless you and keep you in the way of truth,  
both now and forever.

**Amen.**

**SENDING HYMN:** O Christ, Your Heart, Compassionate (#722)

### **DISMISSAL**

Go in peace, share the gift of God's grace and mercy.

**Thanks be to God.**

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