

# Lent 4

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March 30, 2003

## Prayer of the Day

God of all mercy, by your power to heal and to forgive, graciously cleanse us from all sin and make us strong; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

## Numbers 21:4-9

{4} From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. {5} 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." {6} Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. {7} 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. {8} 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." {9} 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.

5. *there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food*: A seeming contradiction, but the complaint is that there is no "real" food; the manna is a poor substitute.

6. *poisonous serpents: hannahashim hasserafim*. The verb *seraf* means burn, perhaps referring to the poisonous bite of the snake. The same word is used in Isaiah 6:2; 14:29; 30:6 for messengers of Yahweh who appear as winged serpents.

9. *a serpent of bronze: [nehash nehoshet]*. The words for "snake" and "bronze" (or "copper") are very similar. "Moses reasoned thus: If I make it of gold [*zahav*] or silver [*kesev*] these Hebrew words do not resemble each other. Hence I will make it out of copper (*nehoshet*) since this word resembles the other, namely, *nehash nehoshet*—a copper serpent." [1] In the eighth century B.C. King Hoshea "broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan [*nehushtan*]" (2 Kings 18:4).

## Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

{1} O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. {2} Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble {3} and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.... {17} Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction; {18} they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. {19} Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress; {20} he sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction. {21} Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. {22} And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

1. *O give thanks...*: See Psalms 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29; 136:1; 1 Chronicles 16:34. See also Psalms 105:1; 136:3; 1 Chronicles 16:8 for similar statements. This is a summons to thanksgiving.

2. *Let the redeemed of The Lord say so*: Not say that they are the redeemed of the Lord, but say the words of the first verse. In this Psalm the several groups are invited to give

Yahweh thanks. Their situation is described (for example, verses 4-5), their cry to the Lord (verse 6) and his saving action (verse 7), an invitation to thank Yahweh for his act (8-9), with the expectation that an act of thanksgiving would follow. Then the process starts over. The groups mentioned in the Psalm are lost desert wanderers (4-9), freed prisoners (10-16), the sick (17-22), seafarers saved from shipwreck (23-32).

*2b-3:* The redeemed of the Lord are identified as those who have been freed from exile.

*17. sick through their sinful ways:* While there are cases where the connection between sickness and sin is rejected (for example, John 9), here the connection is made explicit.

*18. they loathed any kind of food:* The nature of their illness is clarified. And the consequence of it is noted. This is the connection with the first lesson, Numbers 21:5.

*the gates of death:* See Job 38:17; Psalm 9:13; Isaiah 38:10, "gates of Sheol;" Matthew 16:18, "gates of Hades." "Sheol" is the realm of the dead in Hebrew; Hades is the same in Greek. It is "the common fate of all the dead, a place of darkness and gloom, where the shades lead an unenviable, fading existence." [2]

*20. he sent out his word and healed them:* Yahweh's word like his name "is" Yahweh. The reference is probably to an oracle of healing spoken by a Temple functionary, but it is Yahweh's word, and it heals. For the power of Yahweh's word see Isaiah 55:10-11, "it shall accomplish that which I purpose;" also Psalm 147:15-19.

*21-22:* In response to Yahweh's gracious action, those who were healed are invited to thank him, offer a thanksgiving sacrifice, and to tell of Yahweh's great deeds. At this point they would respond with the statement in verse 1. See Psalm 118 for an example of how this would work.

## **Ephesians 2:1-10**

*{1}* You were dead through the trespasses and sins *{2}* 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. *{3}* 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. *{4}* But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us *{5}* even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved-- *{6}* and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, *{7}* so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. *{8}* For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- *{9}* not the result of works, so that no one may boast. *{10}* 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.

*1. You:* Gentiles, in contrast with "we" in verse 3, which refers to "us Jews."

*were dead:* In Psalm 107:17 "Some were sick [and near the gates of death] through their sinful ways." The connection between sin and sickness is old and deep.

*2. ruler:* Cf. John 12:31; "ruler of this world." According to 6:12 we struggle "against the rulers...the spiritual forces of evil."

*spirit* This is a spirit of disobedience. Both are references to the devil.

*3. us...we:* See note on verse 1.

*by nature children of wrath, like everyone else:* According to Paul everyone, Gentile and Jew, is lost and condemned by nature. If we take this seriously, then we are helpless and without hope. If we are no longer lost, then it is simply because God has acted for us. No one, then, whom God has not acted for can claim to be saved. And no one who is saved can claim to have contributed anything, least of all righteous behavior (see verse 9), to his/her salvation.

*4. the great love with which he loved us:* This makes a connection with John 3:16, "God so loved..."

*5. by grace you have been saved:* In verse 8 this is repeated and clarified: "this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God."

6. *raised us up with him*: Although the Greek word is different from "lifted up" in John, the idea is the same. As Christ is lifted up, raised from the dead, we have been raised and made alive with Christ.

10. *we are what he has made us*: That is what human beings were before the Fall. Now it is important that we do not seek to "be like God" again, asserting our own righteousness, but rather that we live out "our way of life" for which we are now created. "Christians do not invent or concoct good works; they are not the creators of these works.... He who does something good receives it from the Lord (6:8). Good works are the only appropriate way to recognize, to accept, and to witness to the goodness shown in Christ." [3]

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

{14} And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, {15} that 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. {18} 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. {19} 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. {20} For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. {21} 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."

"In vss. 14-15 Jesus proceeds to the actual answer to Nicodemus' question, 'How can things like this happen?' Begetting through the spirit can come about only as a result of Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension." [4]

14. *lifted up*: "John constantly refers to Jesus' being 'lifted up,' where the Synoptic authors speak of 'dying.'.... John's love of irony is thus evident in seeing Jesus' humiliation and death as an exultation, lifting Jesus above what is of the earth." [5]

*the serpent in the wilderness*: Lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness is cited as a type of the crucifixion of Jesus (John 3:14f.). This is a more positive view of the image than 2 Kings reflected. There are three statements concerning the "lifting up" of the Son of Man, 1:14; 8:28; 12:32-34. "...these statements are the Johannine equivalents of the three predictions of the passion, death, and resurrection found in all the Synoptics." [6]

15. *eternal life*: "while the duration of life (endless) is no doubt involved here, it is the *quality* of life, life a new and better sort, that is central to John's antilanguage." [7] (An antilanguage is used by a deviant group to give its own meanings to common words, to express its opposition to the dominant society.) In John 17:3 Jesus defines "eternal life" in terms the quality of life, of knowing God and Christ, rather than in terms of the duration of life. "This life emerges as Jesus bows his head and breathes out 'his spirit' (19:30). Jesus' final breath is in fact the new breath of life, surpassing in quality the original 'breath of life' with which God animated humankind (Gen. 2:7)....Jesus' friends receive this Spirit when Jesus 'breathes' on them (20:22)...." [8] The Spirit is expressly withheld during Jesus' life (John 7:39).

16. *his only Son*: An implicit reference to Genesis 22:2, 12: "Abraham was commanded to take his *only* son Isaac whom he *loved* to offer to the Lord." [9]

18-21: The community of those who believe in Jesus is the "anti-society" to which John is writing. Belief in the Son whom God sent is constitutive of the community. Those who do not believe in the Son are outside the community and condemned. They loved the darkness which concealed their evil deeds rather than the light that has come into the world. God did not condemn them, they condemned themselves. Those whose deeds are true to the will of God come to the light so their deeds may be seen. "Jesus is a penetrating light that provokes judgment by making it apparent what a man is. The one who turns away is not an

occasional sinner but one who ‘*practices* wickedness’; it is not that he cannot see the light, but that he hates the light.... it is a question of radical evil." [10]

## Reflection

Although the people of Israel were impatient God was concerned for their welfare in the wilderness. He commanded Moses concerning the construction of the bronze serpent by which he rescued the people from the poisonous snakes. The psalmist knows that the people were saved and healed by the word of God, and he calls on them to that the Lord for his love and wonderful works. Paul tells us that even when we were dead in our trespasses we were saved by grace through faith.

In the gospel Jesus tells Nicodemus that God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son, not to condemn the world for its sin, but so those who believe might have life in him. Unlike the first two Sundays and next Sunday as well, there is no mention of a covenant between God and his people. Still, the story of the bronze serpent points to the dependence of the people on their God, and Yahweh’s concern and loving care for his people. This same care and concern he expressed in Jesus whom he sent to bring life and light into the world. As the serpent was lifted up so that those who believed could look at it and be saved, so Jesus, too, will be lifted up, and those who believe will be saved.

## Hymns [11]

*With One Voice* (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, II=Psalm; II=Second Lesson;

G=Gospel

520 --E--Give to Our

292 --D--God Loved the

336 --P--Jesus, Thy

Boundless

207 --II--We Who Once

105 --G--A Lamb Goes

100, 489, 296, 385, 800s, 344

## Prayers of the People [12]

A: The word of God's great love for the world, though often overused, remains true. It becomes an invitation and a dividing point between faith and unbelief. It beckons to life eternal. With it in mind, we ask, "Restore us, O Christ," and respond with a fervent C: Amen.

A: Let us pray for Christian congregations grown old, worn smooth, and found weary.

P: Spirit of God, inspire us anew with the beloved story of Jesus and his love. Remove any tarnishing of gospel truth. Hurl back the darkness of subtle unbelief. Restore us O Christ. C: Amen.

A: Let us pray for leaders of governments that are tradition-bound, uncharitable and oppressive.

P: God of power and might, so speak to those who govern that they may seek a social order that cares for people and their wholeness. Restrain unmerited power and authority that deny just treatment. Plant deep in the hearts of those who take counsel for nations large and small, a will to serve and redeem. Restore us, O Christ. C: Amen.

A: Let us pray for those women and children who are abused by word and deed.

P: Graciously hide and protect those places in our community that offer refuge for those beleaguered by demeaning language and physical violation. Open the eyes of abusers to the unworthiness of such attacks. Let them see continuing threads of violence between generations. Restore us, O Christ. C: Amen.

A: Let us pray for those who are preparing for full membership in our congregation.

P: For those enrolled for the purpose of joining the family of faith, we ask that they may know at heart what it is to be saved by grace. Restore us, O Christ. C: Amen.

P: We commend everything to your care, God of grace. C: Amen.

Or[13]

*Presider or deacon*

God lifted up Christ in the wilderness of the world. As we prepare for the paschal feast, let us lift up our prayers to God for all peoples everywhere.

*Deacon or other leader*

For the holy catholic church throughout the world, sharing the death and resurrection of Christ.

For *N* our bishop, for presbyters and deacons and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.

For *NN* our catechumen(s) and *NN* their sponsors.

For all the peoples of the earth and for their leaders.

For all who are sick, wandering, afflicted, or oppressed.

For the dying and the dead.

For our families, friends, and companions, and for all those we love.

*Presider*

Blessed are you, God of Moses, who sent the light into the world. Receive the prayers we offer this day for those in need in every place and anoint the head of all who come to your table. Glory to you for ever and ever.

## Notes

[1] Genesis Rabbah 31:8.

[2] Richard Bauckham, "Hades, Hell," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday, vol. 3, 1992, p. 14.

[3] Marcus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1-3*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1974, p.250.

[4] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., p. 145.

[5] Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 85.

[6] Brown, *Ibid.*, p. 146.

[7] Malina, *Loc cit.*

[8] *Loc cit.*

[9] Brown, *Ibid.*, p. 347.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 149.

[11] <http://www.worship.ca/text/wpch0203.txt>

[12] [http://www.worship.on.ca/text/pray\\_b1.txt](http://www.worship.on.ca/text/pray_b1.txt)

[13] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>