

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

March 14, 2021

Fourth Sunday in Lent

PRELUDE *“In the Cross of Christ I Glory”*

GREETINGS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning, my friends! And welcome again to worship. Today marks the completion of a full year of worshipping together from separate places. A year ago, when we gathered in the social hall, as prelude to our time of prayer together, we talked about the growing concerns about what had just been named a pandemic and what our response should be. We agreed to continue meeting in our building, only to be told by our governor in the next few days that we needed to stay home and not gather in groups at all. Little could we have known what lie ahead or how long we would be apart. This week, as we've passed countless mile markers and reviewed the past year, I've felt again my gratitude for your care and caution, my concern for the isolated and despairing, my dependence on the wisdom and guidance of God's Holy Spirit, and my hope for the dawn that appears to be breaking. As our Conference Minister, Mike Denton, says regularly these days, we're getting close – but we're not there yet. And so as we gather together and as we look ahead to the decisions and choices we'll make in the coming weeks, I pray for the ongoing wisdom and guidance of God, and for our continued attentive listening and compassionate living. May God be among us, in this time of worship, and in all that we do – and don't do – in the coming days. Please join me in the Call to Worship.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Friends of God, believe this – God loved the world, God loves the world, we are the beloved!

May the truth of this great love story, shine through our worship today, and renew our sense of calling.

So come, with your tiredness, your frustrations and your discouragements; come with your doubts, your fears, and your longings; come, to discover yet again how Jesus reveals God's love and mercy.

We come, in friendship to God and to each other, and in friendship to the world, to listen for God's Word to us, to offer our prayers, and to renew our calling.

Friends of God, let us worship! (Ann Siddall, Stillpoint Spirituality Centre: <https://stillpointsa.org.au/>)

SONG *“Lavish Love, Abundant Beauty”*

Lavish love, abundant beauty, Gracious gifts for heart and hand.
Life that fills the soul and senses – All burst forth at your command.
Lord, our Lord, Eternal Father, Great Creator, God and Friend,
Boundless power gave full expression To your love which knows no end.

Who am I that you should love me, Meet my every need from birth?
Why invest yourself so fully In a creature made of earth?
In your loving heart you planned me, Fashioned me with greatest care;
Through my soul you breathed your Spirit, Planted your own image there.

I am yours, Eternal Maker, All my body, mind and heart.
Take and use me to your glory, Form yourself in every part.
Lord, your love brings joy and gladness Flowing forth within my soul.
May my very breath and being Rise to you, their source and goal.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (in unison)

Almighty God, you have set before us the path but we have wandered on our own to try to find our way. Sometimes we are like toddlers and we hear your call and come back. Other times, we are children testing boundaries, ignoring your call until fear finally makes us look back. And still other times we are full of youthful rebellion, demanding to be cut loose and set free, not knowing how much we still need to seek your wisdom and guidance. But most of all, too often we think we are adults and have figured it all out and know our own way, only to stumble and stray so far. Remind us, parental God, that we are always your children, that we are never fully grown up in your sight, that we always have much to learn. Help us to seek you every day, to acknowledge that we need your wisdom and guidance, and help us to return to the path and walk with you. In the name of Christ, who is our companion on this journey of faith, we pray. Amen.

(written by Rev Mindi, posted on <http://rev-o-lution.org/>)

ASSURANCE OF GRACE

Like the faithful, loving parent that God is, God waits for us and readily welcomes us home whenever we turn again and return to God. Eager to teach and heal, overflowing with welcome and joy, God receives us with love, surrounds us with grace and invites us forward in peace. Thanks be to God!

SCRIPTURE READING John 3:14-21

Judy Hofmann

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“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.

“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. 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. 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. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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.”

SERMON

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. Is there anyone who doesn't know that verse? Or some variation of it? Even in these days of growing biblical illiteracy, it's everywhere. Maybe the verse, maybe just the reference. John 3:16, as a stand alone and, with it, the assumption that everyone knows what you're talking about. It's on T-shirts, memes, bumper stickers, and signs at sporting events (especially in end zones). Somebody even referenced the eye-black of an NFL quarterback; clearly, there's a story there that you're going to have to share with me, because I don't watch enough sports to have a clue.

What I do think I have a clue about, and I could be wrong, so again, feel free to educate me, but what I tend to hear and see in the pronouncements is a declaration of belief in Jesus. Just like the second half of the verse calls for. In the Lenten Devotional that some of you picked up at the church, Matt Laney, refers to this verse as one that is often used as a litmus test. He wrote, “If you believe in Jesus (which is code for ‘if you believe what I believe about Jesus’), then you will be saved from eternal damnation. If not, your ultimate destination is bleak. The verse is used and abused as a pretext for condemning people to hell.” (*Promises, Promises*, March 10, 2021). Or I might put it a little differently, and wonder

if the verse isn't used to decide who's in and who's out, who's saved and who's headed for the fiery furnace.

John 3:16 is a verse that has never been one of my top ten. Truth be told, it can make me more than a little nervous, in large part because I don't resonate with the assumption that proclaiming what I believe will seal my eternal fate – and from there I'm free to go out and live as I see fit. But much more than that, I think the question of John 3:16, for me, comes down to em-PHA-sis. Do I highlight the second half, everyone who believes in Jesus is good for eternity, the rest are condemned? Or do I focus on the first half, God so loves the world that God gave the beloved son to that world? Now that's an entirely different verse. One that I can really get excited about. And when I pair it with the next verse, I read a really strong statement on the loving and graceful intentions of God in sending Jesus. John 3:17 says, God did not send the son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. To rescue it. To create a path and shine a light and show us the way home.

God so loved the world... One writer (Paul Shupe, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2*) has suggested that it's possible to read the whole Bible as God's love story for the world, from rescuing the slaves in Egypt to the insecurity and injustice that threatened the well-being of the poor and powerless, from the opening of the early church to welcome in the Gentiles alongside the Jews to sending Jesus as the incarnation of God, to teach that love is not merely for those who look and think and believe like us, but even for our enemies and those who persecute us. The message permeates the Bible, a message of divine love that searches and reaches without limit, that offers mercy and grace, the draws people close and welcomes sinners in. A love that seeks to restore the original intention of creation, a vision of mutual love and committed companionship. Throughout the story of the Bible, people have resisted that vision and turned away, as the text says, preferring the darkness to the light. But still God loves, still God comes, still God sends light into the world with the intent of dispelling darkness, reaching for the lost, embracing the outcast, welcoming sinners home.

God so loved the world... There's more in those five words than the notion of love; there's also the scope of the love. It's given to the world. Not to the church. Not to the faithful. Not to those who think like us, look like us, talk and believe like us. Not even just to humans, but to the world. To the forests and lakes, mountains and rivers, trumpeter swans and bald eagles, kangaroos and polar bears. No one and no thing is beyond the scope of God's love. It's staggering to even try to comprehend the expansive enormity of what's being extended to us, laid at our feet and planted in our hearts.

There's one part of this passage that struck me as new information this week, and that's in verse 19, where we read, this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light. The Greek word that has been translated here as "judgment" is *krisis*, from which we get our word "crisis". This isn't about judgment as we think of it, but a crisis moment that demands a decision. Neutrality is not a option. God has sent Jesus into the world as love and as light, and his arrival delivers us a moment of discernment, in which we must decide how we are going to respond, and how we are going to live. With love? With light? Or will we continue to choose the darkness of our own small worlds, our own self-interest, our own comforts and conveniences?

I recently read the book *Love is the Way*, by Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. In it, he tells the story of a political campaign rally that took place in Fayetteville, North Carolina in March, 2016. The rally was disrupted by protesters, as was happening at both Clinton and Trump rallies around the country. Eventually law enforcement led the protesters out, and as they did a 79-year old white man named John McGraw jumped out from the crowd and punched one of the detained protesters in the face. The protester's name was Rakeem Jones, and he was black. Afterward, McGraw said on video, "He deserved it... The next time we see him we might have to kill him... We

don't know who he is. He might be with a terrorist organization." McGraw was arrested and charged with assault. Months later, the two men met again in court, where McGraw pleaded no contest, apologized and was sentenced to twelve months of probation. Afterward, they faced each other and shook hands. McGraw said, "If I met you in the street and the same thing occurred, I would have said, 'Go on home. One of us will get hurt. That's what I would have said. But we are caught up in a political mess today, and you and me, we got to heal our country.'" Later, at Jones's request, they had lunch together (pages 207-208)

I'd like to think that that lunch was the beginning of turning toward love – in both men. More often than not, it begins with getting to know people, taking the time to learn their names, listen to their stories, hear what their hurts and hopes are. There's love in that process, and light – and God. And we desperately need more of that in this state, country and world. We live in a time full to overflowing with looking at people, slapping labels on them, jumping to conclusions and putting them in boxes. There's no light in that, only darkness. There's no life in that, only death. There's no love in that, only hatred and pain, selfishness and fear.

God so loved – and still loves the world, that God came among us in Jesus. Even knowing how cruel and mean this world can be, God sent the beloved son into the world to share love and to shine a light into our darkness. There were people in the world who didn't take kindly to the arrival of all that love – a love that reached out to people others thought unworthy of love, a love that rocked the boat and made waves, a love that spoke its piece and stirred up good trouble, a love that welcomed in and embraced, that healed and set free, that listened and cradled. God is still sending that love into this world and telling us its time to make a choice. Will we live by love? Walk in light? Or go another way? The choice is ours, and the moment to decide is now.

Let me close with a "A Story of Love" written by Roddy Hamilton, and based on John 3:16:

gather round
I have a story to tell
of one who reached inside himself
and took a handful of love
like a pile of stardust
and said: this is for you
it is all you need
it is all you will ever need
there is enough here
to change the whole world
take it

many laughed at him
mocked him
and ignored the invitation

but some dared to take it
and those who did
noticed something about this love
they found they could do what the gift-giver could do
they could stand with the lost
welcome the traveler
eat with the hungry
they found themselves doing what the man first did to them

give something of themselves to others
they became like the man
offering themselves
and as they offered themselves
others took the invitation
and many still do
and many still trust
it is enough to change the whole world

posted on Listening to the Stones. <http://newkilpatrickblog.typepad.com/nk-blogging/mucky-paws/>

May it be so. Amen.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Nancy: Prayers of joy for Sam and JoHannah. They're having a baby in October.

Geoff and Alice: We are thankful to be heading back to hug our Grandkids in Florida. Yet, we thank all you good folks of the Silver Valley and Wallace as well, that we were lucky enough to interact with while here, and become an active part of the Wallace UCC Church.

The prayer I want to share with you today was written as a “Prayer to Mark One Year of the Pandemic”, and it was generously offered through the SALT Project, who I get emails from every week with wonderful resources. The people behind the prayer are Elizabeth and Matthew Myer Boulton.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Good shepherd, thank you for walking with us through this valley of the shadow of death: through the suffering, the anxiety, the loneliness, the boredom, the longing for closeness and the longing for personal space, the confusion and fear, the impatience and hope, the good days and the bad.

Forgive us for our suspicions of each other, the ways this ordeal has made us more divided, as a country and a world. Help us bridge our differences and come together — even as we are physically distant.

Thank you for all the ways, large and small, that this ordeal has strengthened us as a community: the acts of kindness, the new ways of doing things, the support we've offered and received.

Forgive us for the inequities this pandemic has exposed. Kindle in our hearts a new commitment to justice as we build and rebuild our community together. Keep us ever mindful of those most in need.

We pray especially for those of us who have lost loved ones, lost jobs, lost hope.

Let us be good company, even from afar; good neighbors; and good friends.

We pray especially for those on the front lines of the pandemic, for all who are in harm's way.

Gentle God, we ask that you continue to keep watch with those who work, or watch, or weep this day. Walk with those whose bodies are holding memories of sickness, of trauma, of pain, of confusion, of chaos, of isolation.

Give your angels charge over those who still cannot sleep because of anxiety or grief.

Tend the sick, give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; all for your love's sake.

God of life and hope, lift our spirits as we dare to look ahead, dare to hope and dream about the new world to come. Strengthen our efforts, deepen our wisdom, so we might hasten that day.

And until that day, keep our eyes and hearts open to the signs of hope and life all around us.

For new ways to connect with each other, we give you thanks and praise!

For teachers and nurses and doctors and agricultural workers and grocery clerks and small business owners and frontline workers of all kinds, we give you thanks and praise!

For the beautiful hope of being together again in person one day, lifting our voices in song, passing the peace, sharing cups of coffee, being able to hug one another again — for that day that is surely coming, we give you thanks and praise!

For the ways in which our eyes have been opened by this ordeal, for the ways in which our hearts have been broken and put back together differently, softer and more attuned to the needs of the most vulnerable, we give you thanks and praise!

For all of these things and more, gentle God, we give you thanks and praise in the name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Jesus, the one who taught us to pray together, saying: **Our Father...**

(Elizabeth and Matthew Myer Bolton, SALT Project)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

It's been your habit for much longer than I've been your pastor to consider the Emergency Aid Fund on every second Sunday of the month. It's become a routine time to remember and contribute to a designated fund that we use to respond to needs that come up among us and around us. We've used it in recent years to get a hotel room and meals for people who are stranded in Wallace and need to get in out of the cold – or heat; we've bought bus tickets and put gas in cars and trucks, paid utility bills and helped provide a couple of Christmas gifts under trees that otherwise would have had little. It's not a fund that fixes all that people are struggling against, but it makes a difference and lightens a dark time. And most importantly of all, it expresses the love of God and the care of a community of faith. Thank you for the ways you support this fund, and enable us to respond to those who come to us in need.

SONG “*What Wondrous Love Is This*”

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul! What wondrous love is this, O my soul!

What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss

To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul, To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.

To God and to the Lamb, I will sing, I will sing. To God and to the Lamb I will sing.

To God and to the Lamb who is the great “I Am,”

While millions join the theme, I will sing, I will sing, While millions join the theme, I will sing.

BENEDICTION

Just as God's Word was sent into the world to heal and redeem, so God sends us into the world this day to be light and love, healing and hope. Go now to be light for the world! And may the grace and peace of God the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer come upon you this day and remain with you always. Amen. (Kathryn Matthews Huey and Susan A. Blain, United Church of Christ Worship Ways)