

Worship Service
Fourth Sunday of Lent – March 14, 2021
St. Christopher-by-the-Sea
Gibson Island, Maryland

Introduction – The Rev. Charles Rowins

Hymn 632, stanzas 1-2

O Christ, the Word Incarnate

Minister: Blessed by God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

People: *And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever. Amen.*

Minister: Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Song of Praise

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.

*Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father, we worship you,
we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer.*

*For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.*

Collect for Fourth Sunday of Lent

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and ever hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

First Reading: Numbers 21:4-9 – see lesson insert

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 – see lesson insert

Second Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10 – see lesson insert

Hymn 488, stanzas 1-3

Be thou my vision

Gospel: John 3:14-21 – see lesson insert

Sermon – The Rev. Charles Rowins

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Father, we pray for your holy Catholic Church;
That we all may be one.

Grant that every member of the Church may truly and humbly serve you;
That your Name may be glorified by all people.

We pray for all bishops, priests, and deacons;
That they may be faithful ministers of your Word and Sacraments.

We pray for all who govern and hold authority in the nations of the world;
That there may be justice and peace on the earth.

Give us grace to do your will in all that we undertake;
That our works may find favor in your sight.

Have compassion on those who suffer from any grief or trouble;
That they may be delivered from their distress.

Give to the departed eternal rest;
Let light perpetual shine upon them.

We praise you for your saints who have entered into joy;
May we also come to share in your heavenly kingdom.

Let us pray for our own needs and those of others.

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Lord, hear the prayers of your people; and what we have asked faithfully, grant that we may obtain effectually, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Confession

Most merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

Absolution

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. *Amen.*

Announcements and *America*

*My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing;
Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light;
Protect us by thy might, great God, our King.*

Prayer of St. Chrysostom

Almighty God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplication unto thee, and has promised through thy well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name thou wilt be in the midst of them: Fulfill now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting. *Amen.*

Hymn 540, stanzas 1-3

Awake, thou spirit of the watchmen

Dismissal

Alleluia! Alleluia! Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 4th Sunday of Lent, March 14, 2021.

During this Season of Lent, we have been reviewing the Covenant that God establishes with His creation, including little old you and me. God's Covenant is crystal clear. Obey the Commandments and our quality of life will be better than if we don't obey the Commandments. It's that simple, at least in theory.

We know, though, that despite our best efforts, obedience sometimes takes a backseat, often with undesirable consequences. This is not theoretical. This is reality. We know it first-hand. We feel it. We contend with it daily. Sometimes we get the best of it. Other times it gets the best of us.

But, we also know that, as God who has established these rules, God has also established a means for confronting our failure to abide by these rules. Forgiveness with a capital F is not a given. It is a Divine decision. A second and third and fourth chance is not a given. It is a Divine decision.

And the Forgiveness decision is not automatic. We can hope for forgiveness. We can pray for forgiveness. We can forgive others in the name of God forgiving us. But we must never assume that God no longer has the authority to withhold that forgiveness.

Even though we don't earn it doesn't mean that we should take it for granted. Out of thanksgiving, God expects us to exercise our freedom as if God's forgiveness is something we have to earn. It's not guaranteed. God can take it off the table any time God wants.

These are the terms of the Covenant that we have been studying during this Season of Lent. But we have also been studying the desire of God to stick by us as we try to understand our tendency to mess things up. God is constantly trying to reassure us that we haven't nullified God's Love.

Enter today's passage from the Book of Numbers (**Numbers 21:4-9**). After God has led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites grumble against God and Moses. "We detest this miserable food." Is there a better illustration of the

phrase “Don’t bite the hand of the one who feeds you”? I don’t think so. Here’s another phrase: “Be careful what you ask for.”

So, what does the Lord do? “Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, so that many Israelites died.” Which brought the people to their senses. “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you, Moses; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” And, sure enough, Moses prayed, and the Lord responded with a serpent whose bite was more favorable. “That person would look at the new serpent and live.”

Today’s Psalm (**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**) makes the same point. “Some were fools and took to rebellious ways ... but the Lord delivered them from their distress.” To which, the Psalmist adds, “Let them offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving and tell of his acts with shouts of joy.”

Not only does God bail out the Hebrews, the Lord tells them how to avoid such foolishness in the future.

In his letter to the Ephesians (**Ephesians 2:1-10**), St. Paul reinforces this point. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of our works.”

Jesus made this point earlier, as related in one of the finest passages in Scripture, if not the finest (**John 3:14-21**). “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.”

That’s why you and I are here. God lays down the rules. It’s a tough assignment, but good teachers give challenging assignments. And sometimes we choose not to obey the rules. We exercise our God-given freedom in a manner contrary to God’s expectations. And we get ourselves and others in trouble. And, by ourselves, we can’t escape the trouble. The serpent bites and we don’t have a treatment of our own. But God does have that treatment. And God chooses to exercise that treatment. In short, we are saved for another day of decision-making.

God hopes that we learn our lesson, but sometimes we falter for a variety of reasons. And it's right here that we hope that God's promise of forgiveness is still in effect. And we move on.

Which takes us back to the notion of Covenant. It's an agreement designed and instituted by God. We don't draw up the terms. God does. But the terms are remarkably favorable to us, in that God's love is big enough to include a pretty large Forgiveness component.

We can't take it for granted – God would not be pleased with that response – but we can seek it with a contrite heart and promise to do better. Never assuming that God's response will always be favorable, but always trusting that a second and third and fourth chance is always a possibility, and, when granted, always worth our thanksgiving and better behavior.

Today's Collect puts it this way: "Evermore give us this bread which gives life to the world, that he, Jesus, may live in us, and we in him, now and for ever.

A very refined way of telling us, encouraging us, warning us, always to say "Thank you, Lord." Thank you for the behavioral expectations as set forth in the Commandments, for the freedom to meet those expectations or not, and for whatever response you choose to make, which we understand will be delivered in love, even when tough for us.

But it's this toughness that carries the seeds of fulfillment, not only for us, but for those we touch. Our final hymn today offers this phrase: "O Lord, now let thy fire enkindle our hearts ... and spread the glory of our redemption, till all the world thy saving grace shall know."

Tough? You bet. On our own? No way. This assurance is what you and I exchange with one another every time we gather: "The Lord be with you. *And also with you.*"

It is this confidence and follow-through that is our greatest contribution to the whole world. This is the great reminder of the Season of Lent and of every Season: "Never underestimate God's power in and through us." Amen.

Lessons for 4th Sunday of Lent – March 14, 2021

Collect: Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

First Reading: Numbers 21:4-9

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. 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 now water, and we detest this miserable food.” Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 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. 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.” 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.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
and his mercy endures for ever.

Let all those whom the Lord has redeemed proclaim
that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.

He gathered them out of the lands;
from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some were fools and took to rebellious ways;
they were afflicted because of their sins.

They abhorred all manner of food
and drew near to death's door.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.

He sent forth his word and healed them
and saved them from the grave.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his mercy
and the wonders he does for his children.
Let them offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving
and tell of his acts with shouts of joy.

Second Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins 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. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and sense, and we were by nature children of wrath like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works so that no one may boast. 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.

Gospel: John 3:14-21

Jesus said, “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.”

Hymns for 4th Sunday of Lent – March 14, 2021

Hymn 632, stanzas 1-2

O Christ, the Word Incarnate

O Christ, the Word Incarnate, O Wisdom from on high,
O truth, unchanged, unchanging, O Light of our dark sky;
we praise thee for the radiance that from the scripture's page,
a lantern to our footsteps, shines on from age to age.

The Church from our dear Master received the word divine,
and still that light is lifted o'er all the earth to shine.
It is the chart and compass that o'er life's surging sea,
mid mists and rocks and quicksands, still guides, O Christ, to thee.

Hymn 488, stanzas 1-3

Be thou my vision

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
all else be nought to me, save that thou art
thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father; thine own may I be;
thou in my dwelling, and I one with thee.

High King of heaven, when victory is won,
may I reach heaven's joys, bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my heart, whatever be fall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Hymn 540, stanzas 1-2

Awake, thou spirit of the watchmen

Awake, thou Spirit of the watchmen, who never held their peace by day or night,
contending from the walls of Zion against the foe, confiding in thy might.
Throughout the world their cry is ringing still, and bringing people to thy holy will.

O Lord, now let thy fire enkindle our hearts, that everywhere its flame may go,
and spread the glory of redemption till all the world thy saving grace shall know.
O harvest Lord, look down on us and view how white the fields; the laborers, how few!