

by Bill Moore

Spread a cloth of Lenten purple on a table, open a bible, and put an unlighted candle beside it.

**LEADER:** In darkness our senses have no certainty.

**ALL:** We will walk in Jesus' light.

**LEADER:** Jesus asks that we see with believing eyes and love without knowing our love will matter.

**ALL:** We will walk in Jesus' light.

**LEADER:** May those who live by faith light the way we cannot see.

**ALL:** Help us love the light.

*Conclude by lighting the candle.*

One morning when the home health aide and I were helping my father out of bed, I stepped on his toe. He shuddered with pain and cried, "Ow!"

I said, "Sorry, Dad," and kept on with the business of helping him get comfortable in the wheelchair. But the aide paused, leaned down to Dad, stroked his shoulders and made comforting sounds, asking if it hurt too much, empathizing with his pain.

Later, I thanked her for her care and remarked how sensitive she was to my father's hurt and how tender she was with him. She replied that when she was a small girl, thugs had come for her own father, attacked him with machetes, and left him to die.

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

"Can you imagine seeing your father," she said, "that big man you ran to who would catch you up with just one hand so strong and lift you up all the way to his chest and hug you tight, can you imagine seeing him lying in the dirt in his own blood, crying in pain, helpless and dying? That's what I did see—I will see it until the day I die. And, after watching him like that, I cannot bear to see anyone in pain—even a little. I want to comfort them and take it away, somehow."



In this Sunday's gospel, Jesus says that he must be lifted up so that whoever believes may have eternal life. Lifted up on the cross, it turns out he meant.

But God did not crucify God's Son; it was other human beings, who killed the Son of Man. But it was humans, too, who were moved to pity by Jesus' horrible suffering. Men and women took him down from the cross, caressed and washed his body, and laid it in the tomb. Women and men believed his passage to New Life and dedicated their lives to spreading his Good News of God's love, serving the suffering, the poor and the outcast of this world.

Jesus said that he had to be lifted up so believers may have eternal life. Perhaps, too, he was lifted up so we could see, as in a mirror, the horror and senselessness of the pain we humans inflict on one another, and vow, "No more. Never again!"

My friend, the health aide saw her father die a terrible death and was moved to devote her life to relieving others' pain. Believing in Jesus, who was lifted up on the cross, may we not only have eternal life but be ever so tender and gentle with our fellow travelers through this vale of tears.

● Who has helped you respond with compassion to others' pain?

# GOSPEL

## Jesus' self-giving death gives life.

**NARRATOR:** Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had sneaked to see him under cover of darkness.

**JESUS 1:** Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes may have eternal life.

**JESUS 2:** For God so loved the world that God gave God's only begotten Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have life forever.

**JESUS 1:** God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but so the world might be saved through him.

**JESUS 2:** Those who believe in him are not condemned.

**JESUS 1:** Those who don't believe in him are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

**JESUS 2:** This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, but people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.



**JESUS 1:** People who do evil deeds hate the light and do not come to the light, so their deeds may not be exposed.

**JESUS 2:** People who do the truth come to the light, so that the light makes clear that their deeds have been done in God.

John 3.14-21

Jesus means born *again*. The word for *from above* can also mean *again*. “How can a person once grown old be born again?” Nicodemus asks Jesus. “Surely he can't reenter his mother's womb, can he?”

Nicodemus gets nothing but the literal meaning of Jesus' words. Neither the image from above nor born again opens his eyes to the mystery of God present in Jesus.

Jesus takes a new and assuring tack in the conversation. He promises the Spirit can work anywhere.

“Just as the wind blows where it will and you hear its sound but don't know where it comes from or where it goes, so it is with anyone born of the Spirit.” The mysterious, invisible, but real power of the Spirit can tease Nicodemus into new insight.

What does being born from above mean? Being baptized, for starters; then, living the Spirit-given life that baptism begins. In other words, seeing and entering and living in the kingdom of God already at hand in this world, attending to the stirrings of the Spirit within us.

● [What's a question you want to ask Jesus?](#)

● [What makes John 3.16 so popular? Why carry a John 3.16 poster to display at a football game?](#)

**A**s their conversation about being born from above ends, Jesus makes a final attempt to help Nicodemus believe in him. Jesus draws on the Old

## Who will save us from ourselves?

Jesus makes little sense to Nicodemus, the Pharisee with whom he is talking in Sunday's gospel. Nicodemus comes secretly under cover of darkness, which suggests his state of mind. Nicodemus almost believes in Jesus. He begins, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God, for no human can perform signs and wonders such as you perform unless they come from God.”

In his response Jesus uses his favorite teaching technique in John's gospel—deliberately creating misunderstanding. “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above,” Jesus tells Nicodemus. “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

What is being born from above about? Nicodemus can't get the image. It seems impossible. He thinks maybe

Testament Book of Numbers for an explanatory image. He compares himself to the serpent Moses lifted up in the desert. Numbers recounts how the Israelites grow hungry and thirsty during their wanderings and complain against God and Moses.

God sends fiery serpents among the people, and many die from their bites. Many others repent and ask Moses to pray to God for them. God instructs Moses to make a fiery serpent out of bronze and put it on a pole. Anyone bitten by a serpent can look upon the bronze serpent and be saved from death.

In comparing himself to this bronze serpent, Jesus confirms Nicodemus's budding faith. Yes, like the serpent, Jesus is from God and has been sent to save people from death. Those who believe in him will have eternal life.

"The hair of the dog that bit them" cures the Israelites of the suffering they bring on themselves. Likewise, by our believing in the Son of Man, Jesus saves us humans from the condemnation and death we inflict upon ourselves and each other. God sends one like us to free us.

God's kingdom is what Nicodemus and all of us hope for. We yearn to see and enter its justice, mercy, peace, and never-ending happiness. We pray it will come soon.

But, people still have to make a choice, Jesus tells Nicodemus. God loves the world and sends the Son to save us but does not compel anyone

## DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- What support do immigrants in your area need; for example, help learning English as a second language, learning to drive, learning a marketable skill, finding affordable housing, determining eligibility for SNAP/EBT cards (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Electronic Benefits Transfer), seeking documentation to stay in this country?

to believe in him. Those who love the darkness and refuse to come into the light can still choose condemnation.

- What poisonous bites have you experienced in your life?
- What has healed them?
- What current hurt do you feel festering in you? What images do you see or dream that suggest how you might seek healing for this hurt?

Jesus' mission is not to condemn the world but to save it. He calls us who believe in him to live in the light, to act for all to see. Jesus calls us not to become accustomed to the harsh realities of our world like racial injustice, militarized police, ethnic cleansing, refugees, workers without jobs and health coverage. We cannot take the daily condemnation and crucifixion of millions of our fellow humans for granted.

But, as Nicodemus eventually does, we, too, by the grace of God, can leave our destructive deeds

behind and come to the foot of the cross to stand in the light of the one like us who is lifted up. We can begin now to see God's kingdom in our midst and live the new life Jesus brings. As we wait and pray for the Son of Man to lift us up with him in resurrection, we can, like Nicodemus and his friends, do our part to take broken and suffering humanity down from the cross.

- Who can I or we take down from their crosses? Whose sorrow and pain can we help nurse?
- Whom does God send us to love?







## A Gentile saves Israel.

The inhumanity of one human to another does not begin with Jesus' crucifixion. Sunday's first reading records an ancient example of God's people losing faith and falling away into injustice and irreverence, "into all the abominations of the nations."

Israel's compassionate God warns them and seeks to spare them from the consequences of their wickedness. But eventually, like their ancestors in the desert whom the fiery serpents bit, the Israelites suffer their own near destruction. In 587 B.C., the Chaldeans (Babylonians) loot Jerusalem, destroy the temple, and kill or carry into captivity most of the people.

After the 70 years Jeremiah prophesied, Israel's faithful and merciful God sends a savior. He is Cyrus the Persian, a Gentile king, who promises to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and invites the exiles to go home.

### Cyrus makes a decree.

All the leading priests and the people were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations and polluting God's temple, which the Holy One had consecrated in Jerusalem.

The Holy One, the God of their ancestors, sent messengers to them, for God had compassion

on the people and the dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised God's warnings, and scoffed at God's prophets, until the anger of the Holy One against the people was so inflamed that there was no remedy. Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious vessels. Those who escaped the sword were carried captives to Babylon, where they became servants of the king of the Chaldeans and his sons until the kingdom of the Persians came to power. All this was to fulfill the word of the Holy One spoken by Jeremiah, until the land has made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath to fulfill seventy years.

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of the Holy One spoken by Jeremiah, God stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written decree:

"Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: 'The Holy One, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and charged me to build a temple in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever among you belongs to any part of God's people, let them go up, and may their God be with them.'"

2 Chronicles 36.14-16,19-23

Exiles and refugees fill our world: children, men and women, the aged and decrepit, fleeing their homes and ruthless slaughter. Who is coming to their rescue?

Must people wait 70 years? These questions test our faith and hope as they sorely try our sisters and brothers who suffer oppression and horror.

What kind of savior do we look for? A military conqueror like Cyrus? A bronze serpent like the one Moses lifted up in the desert? Or one like us, the Son of Man, himself a sufferer, who was lifted up that we might believe in his way?

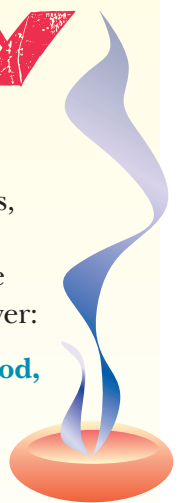
The loving, merciful God of Israel and of Jesus is no *deus ex machina*. God works in human history through human agents such as Moses, Cyrus, Nicodemus, God's own Son, Jesus—and us. If this Jesus is the savior for whom we hope, then we ourselves are necessarily part of the salvation we want him to bring.

● Who suffers exile that you can help return home?

## PRAY

**LEADER:** Let us name people whose walk through pain, darkness, and exile touches us. Respond to each name with the following prayer:

**ALL:** Compassionate God, make us part of their salvation.



Bill Moore holds Master of Arts degrees in Philosophy, Theology, and Adult Education.