

Call to Worship

We thank you for your mercy, which found us when we were lost and leads us even now to the light of your presence.

**Abide with us in our worship today, that your love may fuel our words, our actions, and our resolve to become and remain your welcoming face in the world. Amen.**

Prayer of Invocation

**Would that our lives were perfect, that there were no struggles, wrong turns, or defeats. But we know, steadfast and faithful God, that you are with us and have promised to walk with us not only in good times but through the tough times as well. We pray for your presence in our worship today, secure in your promises, trusting in your word, confident because of all we have seen, heard, and shared. These things we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.**

The Word

John 3:14-21 (NRSV)

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."**

Living the Word

Adjusting your eyes to the light: After 6 days of vacation...on Thursday morning of this past week my alarm clock 'did its thing' to wake me at 7am; time to get up. I thought – just a few more minutes, and closed my eyes for 9 more minutes. I re-awoke but didn't open my eyes. My brain and my mouth were working and I said "Get up, Cathy; get up, Cathy; get up, Cathy; get up; get up; get up!

And I did. But I didn't really open my eyes. Was the problem the light or my resistance to giving up the darkness? I sat on the edge of the bed thanking God, once again for the days off and the good time I had with my grandson Torrence, even so, I didn't open my eyes - all the way - until I felt the cold wet nose of our large dog, Sugar, asking to go outside. Even then they weren't really open until the deck door let in rays of the rising sun off to the east. Sometimes we have to urge ourselves – for our own sakes!

The scripture segment for today picks up in the middle of a conversation. So we should back up a bit to the beginning of John 3:1-2 *Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."*

On another Sunday I will go in depth about "Nick at Night," but for this morning I just want you to know who Nicodemus is – a Pharisee, who came under cover of night to see Jesus, and try to understand what Jesus is really trying to be and do. Their conversation has much to preach on, but we will focus today on the passage that you read earlier.

Jesus is addressing Nicodemus when he says: "*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.*" This passage is referring to the story in the Old Testament book of Numbers 21:4-9, where serpents were biting the ungrateful people and they were dying. Then Moses made a serpent of bronze and when he held it up even those who had been bitten, lived.

Nicodemus would know well what Jesus is referring to when he tells him that Jesus will be lifted up as the one who brings life and life eternal. The phrase refers both to Jesus being lifted up on the cross in death and to Jesus being lifted up to heaven, for Life Eternal.

Like Jesus, the next verse is one that we hold up as a strong reference to the character of God. John 3:16 "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*" Sound familiar? How many of you learned that verse growing up? Do you understand how much God loves you? If God had a refrigerator your picture would be on it.

Leonard Sweet is an author, preacher, and scholar, a Professor of Evangelism at Drew Theological School. Sweet said it this way "For God so hugged the world." He is regularly voted one of the most influential Christian leaders in America. No wonder as he re-works the scripture to remind us that God is, right now, loving each one of us.

There is a story told by Virginia Mollenkott about her life as an English Professor. She says, "I love to watch students come alive. One of the courses I teach is freshman English, and that's a place where you learn to empower people. They often come to you beaten down. All anyone has done was tell them how bad they were in English.

You try to encourage them to write down about who they are, to talk about who they are, and you show some interest in them. You show them that they have something interesting in their lives. They're people. Before I pass back their first graded paper, I give them a little speech: 'This grade is not for you. This grade is for a piece of work you turned in.'

Then I ask them if they want to know what I think of them, and usually they want to. So I continue, 'I think you're made in the image of God and of [immeasurable] worth. There's no way anything I could put in my grade book could ever begin to [measure] you.' She goes on to say 'For me, the meaning of life is to share with people the wonderful news that we are the daughters and sons of God.'

Lent is about much more than just wearing the sackcloth and ashes; or about donning the outward appearance that we are going through 40 days, marking time, in the anticipation of Easter.

It is a time for us to reflect honestly on who we are as the Children of God, missing the mark of perfection, weighed down with our poor choices, sometimes wallowing in the muck and mire of sin, yet still loved by the one who gave us life, and breath and the freewill choice to make the poor choices. Lent is a time to reach out and grasp Christ's hand to be pulled up and out of all of that and receive the grace of God.

There is something greater, something more real than we have given our attention to. Sure many of us can quote John 3:16, but doesn't this passage go deeper than mere memory verses from our Sunday School days? God loves us so much, that God sent his Son to point a light toward God, so we could find our way through this maze of life, knowing that when we stumble, Christ will pick us up – we don't have to stay down. What if our response to this verse became something more like, "Hey, we're alive! Thank God!"

In the musical "Mame" the title character is a rather flamboyant, slightly eccentric and completely alive woman whose life takes many roller-coaster twists and turns. What gets her through the highs and lows with equal balance is her philosophy of life which is summed up in the statement, "Life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death." She chooses at each moment to live, and to do it by holding on for dear life!

Is this what is missing? Do we sometimes approach life as though we have no reason to live? Has anyone ever told you to "Get a life!" That phrase usually means that you're too much into that one thing and need to see what else is going on around you.

If you were charged with being alive, would there be enough evidence to convict you? At the Ash Wednesday service last year, I talked about being humble enough to accept that it isn't all about you, but all about God. That means taking the chance at living by breathing the air you have been given.

Lent is a time of reflection on you, by you, for yourself. On that day Jesus was speaking personally to Nicodemus and personally to you. Would you repeat after me: "For God so loved me/that God gave his only Son/ so that as I believe in God/ I will not perish but have eternal life."

Moving right along: the next verse, verse 17 is also very important for us. Remember Jesus originally told this to a Pharisee: *"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."*

Jesus didn't come to condemn us, but to save us. We are the ones who condemn ourselves, by who we become as broken down humans. God is not judging who needs more light, who should move out of the darkness where we would rather hide. We decide when we will open ourselves to God's love, if we can or are willing to leave the darkness behind us and accept some or all of what we are offered through the light.

In the morning, or during the night have you ever gotten up and tried to move around the bedroom and find the snack cupboard or the bathroom, just to bump into some obstacles you weren't expecting? Anyone ever found themselves with a stubbed toe, or having banged the crazy bone in your elbow as they wandered in the darkness? Or just decided not to open their eyes?

Adjusting your eyes may be most difficult, if you feel you have been living in the deeper darknesses of life. Then the light may seem bright enough to blind or hurt you, but Christ is ever with you to walk you to and through the adjustments and focusing needed to move in the right directions and get there in one piece.

Lent gives us another opportunity for repentance, an additional chance to turn around. Seems like it is as good a time as any to adjust to the light, rather than walking farther away, continuing to be bruised by the obstacles we run into when we aren't willing to open our eyes.

John's account speaks to the freedom we have been given from trying to carry on through the maze called life, and show us that it is in love that we were created, redeemed and restored, and that it is in love that we are to live. We can choose to accept God's grace through our faith in Christ as Savior.

Christ died for all, but just as we can choose to place our faith in Christ's death for our sins and the resurrection into new life, we can also refuse salvation and a freer life. Similarly, we can give up salvation through faithless neglect of God's redemption for us.

In honor of St Patrick Day, let me share a story: There were three priests living in a small town. One wanted to preserve the old simple Celtic styles of religion: "I abide by the traditions of Patrick and Brigit, the founders of our church." He said.

The second wanted to adopt the new sophisticated styles and doctrines of the Roman Church: "I want to be part of the universal church under the pope in Rome – and that is what Patrick and Brigit wanted," he said.

The third said, "Let people worship and believe in a way that suits them best; if religion is just going to cause divisions, I want none of it.

These three priests remained friends and often met for dinner; but their meetings always ended in an argument. Sometimes they argued about how certain rituals should be performed. Sometimes they argued about heaven, and who would get there.

"I believe that only those who remain loyal to the old Celtic traditions will get to heaven," the first said. "I believe that only those who accept the authority of the pope in Rome will be saved," the second said. "Let each person try to lead a good and honest life," the third said, "and then God will be the judge."

Some years later the three priests died and arrived at the gate of heaven. Peter took the hand of the first priest. "Welcome, friend," Peter said, "you go and sit over there among the others who preserved the Celtic traditions."

Then Peter took the hand of the second priest. "Welcome, friend," Peter said "you go and sit over there among the others who have obeyed the pope in Rome." Finally Peter took the hand of the third priest. "Welcome, friend," he said, "you are free to wander wherever you want."

So the third priest wondered freely amongst all the different groups in heaven. And amongst those able to move around were Patrick, and Brigit – and Jesus Christ himself. Our religiousness sometimes blocks out the light we say we have come to find.

Maybe we could tell the same joke with traditional and alternative worship styles here at Hayward United Methodist Church. Yet God so hugged all the world.

The same light is offered to each of us, but some people just love the darkness. It is as if we are trying to adjust to the light by wearing night goggles or sunglasses, even in the gift of the daylight.

As if we can't allow ourselves to enjoy and appreciate all that God has for us because it might be more than we deserve. We are given permission to explore and to move and to grow. We won't get it all correct each time, but we are given chance after chance to try again.

Over the years, as I served on the Conference Camping Board, I got to visit our Camps for a meetings. As camp stories were told, I was reminded of the times in my teens when we would sit for hours after dark around the campfire sharing our life stories, praying and singing "Kum BaYah" to invite Christ into the circle. There was darkness all around us, but within a small circle as I stared into the flames I remember feeling safe and warm and secure and personal with God.

At the end of Conversation, time to wake up. Jesus was trying to help Nicodemus adjust his eyes to see in the light and out of the dark. This is for us also. You can stand in the light because it is there for you. You can step out of the darkness, letting your eyes adjust to the light a little at a time and then let go of the darkness. Open your eyes all of the way, and the eyes of your heart, they can and will adjust to the light, let them adjust to the abundance of God's love for you.

Jesus offers life, through his life, and then he was lifted up on the cross to death and then he was lifted out of this world through resurrection. God loves you unconditionally and wants to be your light source.

PRAY: Lord help us to receive all you have to offer us, by letting go of those dark places and reaching for the light.