

## Grace

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### Bible Readings

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#### John 3:14-21 (NIV)

<sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

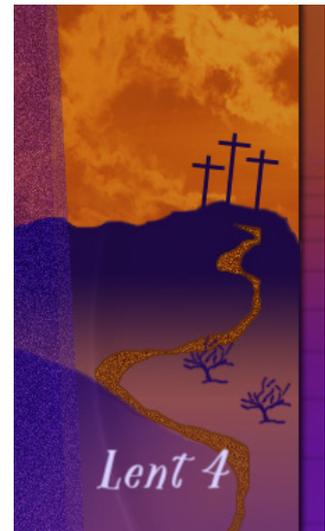
#### Ephesians 2: 1-10 (The Message)

<sup>2</sup> <sup>1-6</sup> It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

<sup>7-10</sup> Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

Hear what God's Spirit is saying to the church.

**Thanks be to God**



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## Reflection

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As I mentioned at the beginning of the service, if I asked you to identify these words “For God so loved the world...” you would quote me chapter and verse.

This is perhaps one of the best known memory verses of all time. It speaks to people in the deepest form of the love of God. God loved the world, in all time and in all generations, so much that he sent his son not to change the way God understands us but rather, the way we understand God. (Pause)

John is my favourite gospel but when researching the author this week, John was things I wouldn't have thought. He was fiery and had a temper, he was ambitious and had undoubted courage. Jesus called he and his brother, James, the Sons of Thunder. But he was also kind and had a gentle love.

The Gospel of John is the only gospel included in the new testament we know, which was written by an apostle – those of the original twelve left to build the church. It is an eyewitness account of Jesus the man and Jesus, the Son of God. It was written many years after the death and resurrection of Jesus and was most likely written as early as AD 65 and as late as AD 95. It was actually written by John the Elder, while John the Apostle dictated or told the story.

This gospel was written near the end of John's long life and was, in part, to put an end to several heresies circulating at the time, assuring its readers and listeners of the divinity of Jesus but also the humanity of Jesus – Jesus fully human and also fully divine. It contains great detail, remembrances and understandings, which serve to personalise and more broadly explain Jesus' purposes in his actions.

Theologians from those of ancient times to those more recently agree on several other things about John's gospel. While the other gospels told the stories and recounted what Jesus did and said, John's gospel tells us what Jesus meant by what he said and did. The gospel contains long passages of explanations, ascribing particular meanings to an event. John's gospel is the only one which tells us about Thomas not believing without seeing, about reinstating Peter, on whom Jesus would then build his church and of the breakfast of fish beside the sea of Galilee after the resurrection. John was there and he saw and heard things which needed to be included, things which are important to us even now, perhaps particularly now.

If I said to you “In the beginning”...most of you would say John 1:1. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...” This is the first time that we hear a declaration that before the formation of everything, Jesus was there, with God.

It is only in John's gospel that we read of Jesus as the Lamb of God and about the three Passover visits Jesus makes to Jerusalem, the first was included in the reading from last week's lectionary when Jesus made a rope and cleared the Temple. His gospel is one where John is clearly not interested in the events themselves but in ensuring that what sat behind the miracles, the healings, the signs and wonders, always pointed to the glory of God. (Pause)

John was the younger son of Zebedee and younger brother of James, another apostle. Their family was wealthy or successful enough to have servants to work along-side the brothers. And he would have been educated, enough to read and write both in Hebrew and Greek at least. Their mother was Salome, and was likely the sister of Mary, Jesus' mother, which made James and John cousins to Jesus. John was also, like Andrew, a disciple of John the Baptist but when John the Baptist

said the one has come who is greater than I, John, the son of Zebedee, answered the call to follow Jesus.

John's name is attached to this gospel plus three letters, though there is raging debate about his being the author of Revelations. John and Jesus were close. John was included in some of the most intimate moments of Jesus' ministry, the mountain scene of the transfiguration of Jesus, preparing the upper room for the final meal, he lay his head on Jesus chest at that meal and then went to keep watch and couldn't keep awake at the garden of Gethsemane. John followed the procession as Jesus first carried and then walked near the cross on his way to the site of the crucifixion and he remained with Jesus and the women until Jesus died. It was Peter and John who ran to the tomb after Mary Magdalene had reported the tomb was empty.

Reading some of the commentaries about John the Apostle, it is clear that he waited a long time to record his gospel. He perhaps had the benefit of reading or hearing the gospels or versions of the story of Jesus written by unknown sources from which Mark, then Matthew and Luke took their lead. He may have read the Acts of the Apostles or perhaps the letters from Paul, as they came to Ephesus, were he lived after Mary's death.

Several commentators make a point that John was not the sole author of the gospel. Luther and Barclay both comment on the role of the Holy Spirit in encouraging and prompting John in this work. It is through John's gospel that we read that Jesus appeared in the locked upper room and offered his peace then breathed on the disciples. He gave them the Holy Spirit and the authority to forgive or retain sin. This same Spirit, as commented on, was also an author of the gospel.

There are stories about John, about what he wrote and didn't write, about where he went and didn't go. We can't be sure, we can't really know. He didn't leave the same kind of digital footprint like we leave these days.

For me though there are then things I feel confident about, things John the Apostle was confident about

- That Jesus was there from before the beginning of everything
- The miracles were not just signs and wonders but statements attesting to the glory of God
- That this is all about believing in Jesus Christ, the son of God, the son of man, the Messiah, saviour, redeemer, brother, friend
- That the means of believing is mystical, sometimes easy and sometimes hard, but always in relationship with God through Jesus
- That God's gift of his son was a gift of unearned and unmerited grace to any and all who will believe.

This is most keenly summed up in Paul's letter to the Ephesians when he writes in v 8 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

I sometime think about Peter as the lead disciple to whom Jesus gave the care of his church but then I think about John as the dearly loved disciple to whom Jesus gave the care his mother, and perhaps that's one reason I enjoy this gospel and commend its reading to you.

So may God add his blessing to these words. Amen.

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