**Readings for March 10, 2024 – Fourth Sunday of Lent**

 Fastened to the God of Light

*God never gives up on us, even when we scorn and reject his message (and his messengers). With his great love and compassion, God keeps trying to reach us. Are we living in darkness, or are we taking steps, each day, to keep moving toward the true light?*

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**Opening Prayer:** Dear Lord, as we gather once again, help us to hear the messages you want to bring to each of us. Give us the clarity to see your great and endless love for us. We long for your light, and trust in your goodness. Amen.

**Reading I** [**2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/2chronicles/36?14)

In those days, all the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people
added infidelity to infidelity, practicing all the abominations of the nations
and polluting the LORD’s temple which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

Early and often did the LORD, the God of their fathers,
send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place.
But they mocked the messengers of God,
despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets,
until the anger of the LORD against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy.
Their enemies burnt the house of God, tore down the walls of Jerusalem,
set all its palaces afire, and destroyed all its precious objects.
Those who escaped the sword were carried captive 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 LORD spoken by Jeremiah:
“Until the land has retrieved its lost sabbaths, during all the time it lies waste it shall have rest
while seventy years are fulfilled.” In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia,
in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah,
the LORD inspired King Cyrus of Persia to issue this proclamation throughout his kingdom,
both by word of mouth and in writing: “Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia:
All the kingdoms of the earth the LORD, the God of heaven, has given to me,
and he has also charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
Whoever, therefore, among you belongs to any part of his people,
let him go up, and may his God be with him!”

**Responsorial Psalm** [**137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/psalms/137?1)

**R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!**By the streams of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
On the aspens of that land we hung up our harps.
**R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!**
For there our captors asked of us the lyrics of our songs,
And our despoilers urged us to be joyous: “Sing for us the songs of Zion!”
**R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!**How could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten!
**R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!**May my tongue cleave to my palate if I remember you not,
If I place not Jerusalem ahead of my joy.
**R. Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!**

**Reading II** [**Eph 2:4-10**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/ephesians/2?4)

Brothers and sisters: God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us,
even when we were dead in our transgressions,
brought us to life with Christ — by grace you have been saved — raised us up with him,
and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come
He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.
For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast.
For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works
that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them.

**Gospel** [**Jn 3:14-21**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/john/3?14)

Jesus said to Nicodemus: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
so that everyone who 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 might not perish but might have eternal life.
For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned,
but whoever does not believe has already been condemned,
because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.
And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light
and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed.
But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

Related Reflections

It is not easy to rejoice always in the Lord. The liturgy for this Fourth Sunday [Laetare Sunday] calls us to rejoice and sometimes our hearts just cannot be there. The Second Book of Chronicles tells of the infidelity of our ancestors in the faith. They just could not remain faithful to God and became worse and worse. Today, at times, our world seems headed in the same direction. We need only think of the countless innocent people still being killed in terrorist attacks and wars around the world. How can this go on in our world?

God allows evil but God does not do evil. Sometimes our hearts resist God because an evil has touched too close to us. In the account from the Second Book of Chronicles, God allows His people to return to their homeland. This is not because all of His people had become good, but only because God is merciful. He does not hold our sins against us.

The Gospel reflects this also: look to the Lord for mercy and you will be healed. John is so very clear: God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. Every time we meet up with an image of God that makes God appear as someone waiting to destroy us or condemn us, we should think of this passage. God loves us even more than we love ourselves.

The Letter to the Ephesians tells us today that even when we were dead in our transgressions, God raised us up to live with Him. So often we Christians don’t really believe that God can love us as much as that, and so we come up with limited images of God’s love for us. Think of the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Father runs to meet his son even before the son has had a chance to apologize. There is no sense here that God will treat His people with anything except love.

Far too often it is we who do not love ourselves because we don’t trust God. Will we come to trust that God loves us more than we could ever imagine? Then we can rejoice in the Lord!

*Monastery of Christ in the Desert – christdesert.org*

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It’s optional, but I’ve always liked it — when the Church’s sacred ministers wear “pink” on Laetare Sunday — Roman Catholicism’s Fourth Sunday of Lent.

The day’s theme comes from the entrance antiphon reflecting on Isaiah 66:10-11: “Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exalt and be satisfied at her consoling breast.”

*Laetare* is the first word — meaning “rejoice” — in the Latin text. On Laetare Sunday (as similarly with the Third Sunday of Advent’s Gaudete Sunday) the Church expresses hope and joy in the midst of our Lenten fasts and penances. Call it pink — or, more fittingly, rose — this change in color indicates a glimpse of the joy that awaits us at Easter, just before we enter into the somber days of Passiontide.

Laetare Sunday is the Church’s way of giving us a “shot in the arm” as we approach the darkness and horror of the days through Good Friday and Holy Saturday. It’s an opportunity to savor and keep in the back of our minds what awaits us on Easter Sunday — the reality that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and that our hearts will always be filled with joy!

 - Michael R. Heinlein, published on SimplyCatholic.com

**Finding Our Joy**

Christian joy is not simply a superficial feeling of heightened delight or the emotion accompanying extreme pleasure. It does not necessarily depend upon one’s immediate circumstances or fortune, as taught by Saint Francis’s example. It does not ignore or deny the troubling reality of indifference, hopelessness, or disappointment. Christian joy lies beyond the realm of feelings and emotions. It is a fundamental disposition and stance toward life.

Descriptive metaphors for it abound: It is the knowledge that having prayed and surrendered, God hears the hopes and desires of my heart and will respond in a timely, appropriate way. God is my shepherd and I must trust God’s heart. Joy feeds on the fact that God stands watch over every situation in my life and guides me with rod and staff. My joy sometimes bubbles up, sometimes surges up, from the rock-bottom certainty that the finger of God is somehow present in every tragic or trivial event.

Joy is the oasis residing in the confident conviction that the waters of God’s loving care and concern never run dry—not even in the desert. The gratuity of grace is always unending and never expiring.

Joy is rooted in the reality of a stone door rolled back from its tomb. Sowing seeds of joy amid sadness requires the two fundamentals of soul training: prayer—invoking assurance and confidence that God is looking out for us—and action—a servant’s surrender and acceptance of consequences without clinging to fears, attachments, control needs, and a sense of entitlement. Both prayer and action plant a servant’s feet in the footprints that lead beyond the tomb of Lazarus and the cross of Calvary.

* From *Soul Training with the Peace Prayer of Saint Francis*, Albert Haase, OFM, Franciscan Media

**Conversation with Nicodemus**

Nicodemus appears only in the Gospel of John. At the end of the Gospel he helps prepare the body of Jesus for burial. The passage we have today is from the middle of the third Chapter of John. At the beginning of the chapter, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He was a Pharisee and a member of Sanhedrin. According to one scholar, Nicodemus probably was impressed by the miracles of Jesus but was not fully convinced that he was the Messiah. So coming to Jesus at night might have been a way for him to take the next step in believing Jesus was the Messiah.

Jesus and Nicodemus have a dialogue right before today’s gospel passage about being born again from above: "Unless a man is born through water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." And the beginning sentence of the Gospel about the Son of man being lifted up "so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" is the preparation for the most quoted phrase in John’s Gospel (3.16) "God so loved the world that he gave his only son that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." This Lenten season, let us ask ourselves, “do I live in such a way as to give witness that “Christ is the Light of the World?” How can I be light for others this week?

 From Marquette University - https://www.marquette.edu/faith/fourth-sunday-of-lent.php

Just like Adam and Eve in the garden, we hide when we are ashamed. We eat too much and hide the candy wrappers at the bottom of the garbage. We tell our boss that the report is done when in reality, we haven’t even started. How freeing it is to live in the light and be seen clearly by God. To live in a way that makes us proud of our actions. We don’t have to hide anymore. (Karen Beattie, *A Book of Grace-Filled Days, 2018*)

**From the Philippine Jesuits:** Our Gospel today tells how God, despite our many short-comings and hard-heartedness, desires to take us out of the darkness of ignorance and sin. As a final redemptive act, God sent his Only Begotten Son to dispel the darkness that makes us slaves to sin. He sent the very Light to conquer Satan, the Darkness himself. He sent the very Life to conquer Death. Every day, every hour, every second that ticks by, God invites us look for the light and follow it. Only by following the Light and those entrusted to keep the light burning bright, we may finally achieve the peace we so desire in this world. - **Fr. Noel Bava, SJ**
<https://www.phjesuits.org/portal/the-people-chose-darkness-over-light-4th-sunday-of-lent/>

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**Suggested Meditation:**

***Spend about 5 -7 minutes thinking individually about the ideas below, then share any thoughts with the group, if you are willing.***

Take a deep breath and get in a comfortable position. Know that God is present in the room with you and acknowledge how that feels.

Think of times when you have been in a dark place in your life, when you weren’t sure how to get out of it. How did this feel? Was there someone, or a situation, that helped?

Name that person and call them to mind in gratitude.

Think of a time when you may have had the opportunity to bring light to someone else or some situation, but you didn’t. How did that feel? What came of things?

Now think about a time when you saw someone else spreading Christ’s light and goodness. Maybe it was to you, or to others in your family or community. What are the qualities of someone who spreads light? Picture the warmth and good outcomes this may have brought.

Am I grateful for others who have lifted me up, and nourished my faith (or even just affirmed my faith that there is still good in the world)? I take a minute now and thank God for those times and those people in my life.

What do I want to say now to the God who is our Light in the darkness?

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Discussion Questions

The first reading reminds us that prophets (the messengers of God) are often scoffed and ignored. Can you think of some modern prophets who have been rejected?

When have I turned away from the Word of God, or moved farther away from a relationship with God?

God promises eternal life to those who believe in Jesus. What do I hope for in eternal life?

God sent his son so that the world might be saved. How have I noticed God’s salvation at work in me and in the world? Talk a little about the kind of salvation St. Paul describes in our second reading. (See below, “responding not earning.”)

Talk a little about Jesus’ statements on light and darkness. Can you think of some situations in our world that are in need of light or exposure? How do we come to the light?

What kind of changes might happen when things are brought into the light?

**Closing Prayer**

Jesus, light of the world, help me to see the light that is your presence, even in my darkest moments. Calm my troubled heart, and remind me that you are near – the stillness beneath the turmoil, the center of my very self. Let me rest there, and let me rise to a new day, ready to receive what you give me, and ready to love from your love that dwells within me. Amen.

 (Adapted from a prayer by Henri Nouwen)

*“Oh Lord, I pray, fasten my soul to you.”*

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Something to pray with this week

***Responding, not earning***

The people preferred darkness… Does it sometimes seem easier to stay in the dark about the pain and oppression our fellow humans are facing? Why does it sometimes seem more comfortable to stay ignorant about things going on around us? Jesus is constantly calling us to come out of our comfort zones; to live as followers of the Light of the World.

As Christians, we work toward the good of others (offering food, clothing, shelter, our time and money when we can). We do good works because we are filled with the Spirit of God and want to live more like Christ. **We don’t earn our way to heaven with our good deeds. St. Paul reminds us of that in our second reading.**

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God.”

We love because God first loved us (1John 4:19) and (John 15: 15-17). God initiates our relationship. He chooses us first with his promise that we are loved. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to recognize God’s great gift of love, and God’s invitation, then we respond to it. So everything we do (even our prayer) is not to earn God’s love, but to RESPOND to it. (From Joe Paprocki, *A Well-Built Faith*, Loyola Press)

In what ways can I respond this week to God’s invitation to love, and to keep moving toward the light?