

## FIRST READING – B 4 LENT

A reading from the second book of Chronicles.

Pause - and look up at the assembly

All the leading priests and the people were exceedingly unfaithful,  
following all the abominations of the nations;  
and they polluted the house of the Lord  
that he had consecrated in Jerusalem.  
The Lord, the God of their ancestors,  
persistently sent his messengers to them,  
because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place;  
but they kept mocking the messengers of God,  
despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets,  
until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great  
that there was no remedy.

Therefore the Lord brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans,  
who burned the house of God,  
broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire,  
and destroyed all its precious vessels.

The king took into exile in Babylon  
those who had escaped from the sword,  
and they became servants to him and to his sons  
until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia,  
to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah,  
until the land had made up for its Sabbaths.

All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath,  
to fulfil seventy years.

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia,  
in fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah,  
the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia  
so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom  
and also declared in a written edict:

“Thus says King Cyrus of Persia:  
The Lord, the God of heaven,  
has given me all the kingdoms of the earth,  
and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem,  
which is in Judah.  
Whoever is among you of all his people,  
may the Lord his God be with him!  
Let him go up.”



Pause for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## SECOND READING – B 4 LENT

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

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 –  
for it is by grace you have been saved.

And God raised us up with Christ  
and seated us with him  
in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,  
so that in the ages to come  
God 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.  
This is 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.

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Pause for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## GOSPEL READING – B 4 LENT

The Lord be with you.

*And with your spirit.*

A reading from the holy gospel according to John.

*Glory to you, O Lord*

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

“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-begotten 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.

The one who believes in him are not condemned;  
but the one who does not believe is condemned already,  
for not having believed  
in the name of the only-begotten 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.”



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

## SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

### **Reading I: 2 Chronicles 36: 14-16, 19-23**

In his priestly rewriting of Israel's history, the Chronicler now reaches the Exile and the return. He offers his explanation of the Exile as a divine punishment along lines similar to 2 Kings, but, significantly, from his standpoint, he stresses that it was a punishment of the preexilic *priests*, as well as the people, for not listening to the preexilic prophets.

He compresses the burning of the temple and the destruction of Jerusalem into a single verse, and interprets the seventy-year exile as a sabbath for the land of Judah, during which it lay desolate.

The last three verses, a verbatim reproduction of [Ezra 1:1-3](#), were, it is generally agreed, added here by a later editor because 2 Chronicles was the last book in the Hebrew canon and the editor did not want the Old Testament to end on a negative note!

As we noted before, the Old Testament readings in Lent point up the highlights of Israel's salvation history. This reading features the Exile.

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### **Responsorial Psalm: 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6**

This psalm, the lament of the exiles in Babylon, fittingly follows the first reading. The theme of Jerusalem was a tradition on this day, the old Laetare Sunday. The psalm presents Jerusalem to the exiles as a memory to be kept alive until better days when the people will be restored to their homeland.

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### **Reading II: Ephesians 2:4-10**

If, as is widely held today, Ephesians is a Deutero-Pauline composition, that is, written by a disciple of Paul and a member of the Pauline school after the Apostle's death, this passage certainly captures the spirit of the Apostle himself.

As in so many New Testament writings of the subapostolic period, we have here a citation from a hymn, evidently a baptismal hymn (note the relative "who," the concentration on the basic facts of the kerygma, and the liturgical "we" style) in verses 4-6.

Note also the parenthetical insertion in verse 5, which changes from the first person plural to the second person plural. Note further the connection between this hymn and that in [Colossians 2:12](#), as well as Paul's exposition of baptism in [Romans 6](#).

All of these passages associate baptism with the death and resurrection of Christ. But there is a difference. In Romans 6 the genuine Paul is careful to say that while we have died with Christ in baptism, nevertheless our rising with him lies in the eschatological future and is a challenge to ethical realization in the present. In Colossians both death and resurrection are experienced already in baptism.

The hymn in Ephesians goes further: not only are we risen with Christ but we have already been translated into heaven with him. This approaches Gnosticism (see [2 Timothy 2:18](#)).

Probably Romans and Colossians are drawing upon the same hymn that Ephesians quotes. We thus

have a trajectory: (1) primitive Hellenistic-Christian baptismal hymn; (2) Romans 6: (3) Colossians 2:12; (4) Ephesians; (5) second-century Gnosticism.

Being in heaven with Christ is not a matter for self-congratulation or for a false sense of security, so the author inserts the parenthesis: “by grace you have been saved.” Christian initiation is not simply, as it was for the Gnostics, an illumination about one’s true, innermost nature.

The author expands this Pauline affirmation very precisely in verse 8 (“by grace . . . through faith”). He then introduces his second anti-Gnostic point: the Christian life is not an intoxication with being in heaven already, but a constant call for strenuous moral effort,

It means doing the good works that God has prepared for us to walk in. This again is good Paulinism. Paul excludes works from any role in justification but insists that they are its consequence.

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### **Gospel: John 3:14-21**

The conversation with Nicodemus is the first discourse in the Fourth Gospel. It is typical of this evangelist's procedure.

He takes an incident in the life of our Lord from his tradition, here an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus (there is good reason to think that this encounter, as a historical occasion, belonged to the later part of the ministry, shortly before the passion).

He then has Nicodemus ask three questions (vv. 2, 4, 9), each of which elicits a pronouncement from Jesus.

Some of the material in these pronouncements, for example, the saying about being born again in verse 3, comes from the sayings tradition and is paralleled in the Synoptists. The rest is an elaboration of Johannine theology.

The first part of the discourse enunciates the necessity for rebirth as the essential prerequisite for entry into the kingdom of God. The second part, from which our passage is taken, explains that this rebirth can only come as a result of the “lifting up” of the Son of man, that is, his death and glorification.

As the quotation marks indicate, it is only the saying about the serpent and the Son of man that is represented as a saying of Jesus. Verses 16-21 are presented as a meditation of the evangelist and look back on the coming of Christ and his saving work as an already accomplished event.

In the opening saying about the serpent and the Son of man, we have an interesting interpretation of the cross. There are several presentations of the atonement in the New Testament, but the one given here is frequently overlooked. It is almost an Abelardian interpretation.

The very sight of Christ lifted up on the cross has power to bring men and women to faith and repentance, just as the contemplation of the serpent lifted up on the pole by Moses (Numbers 21:9ff) was able to heal the Israelites who had been bitten by fiery serpents.

Paul seems to envisage a similar interpretation of the power of the cross when he reminds the Galatians that Christ had been placarded before their eyes as the crucified One (Galatians 3:1).

This may not be a very satisfying doctrine of the atonement intellectually, but from a devotional point of view it has great power.

It is saved from being a purely exemplarist interpretation by the ensuing meditation, which asserts most emphatically that the cross is an act of divine love: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”

This also picks up the words at the opening of the second reading: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us.”

*Reginald H. Fuller*