



*Celebrating  
175 Years*



**March 14, 2021**

Melville United Church

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**Melville United Church**  
**March 14, 2021**  
**Fourth Sunday of Lent**

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Presiding today - Rev. Marion Loree

*We acknowledge with respect the history, spirituality and culture of the Indigenous peoples with whom Treaty 4 - also known as the Haldimand Tract - was signed and the territory wherein our church resides, and we acknowledge our responsibilities as treaty members.*

**Welcome**

*My name is Marion Loree and I am the minister here at Melville United Church in Fergus, Ontario. We gather in community today - March 14, 2021 virtually. Because of Covid-19 restrictions in our area there are no worshipers here with me. We are in code red right now but as restrictions are lifted gradually, we will keep you informed about when in-person worship might resume. Until then, on-line services will continue to be our normal mode of operation with printed copies being distributed to those without internet access.*

*So today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. Lent, of course is the few weeks leading up to Easter. During this time, we focus on the activities and teachings of Jesus as he journeyed toward the city of Jerusalem where he would end up being executed on a cross. It is believed he was resurrected in some form and appeared to some of his followers three days later and that event is what we know as Easter.*

*I invite you to join us now for a time of worship and sharing as we hear the story of Nicodemus and his night visit to Jesus. Perhaps in our sharing you will glean something that might help you in your spiritual journey.*

**Announcements:**

*On-line service of Lament, Thanks and Hope marking one year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Tuesday March 16, 2021 1:30 pm via Zoom. You can find the link by going to our website - [Melvilleunited.com](http://Melvilleunited.com) and clicking on "News and Events" then Announcements and you will see it there.*

**Sharing the Light:** *(If you are watching this on-line or reading it from a page I invite you to take a moment to light a candle, centre yourself and prepare to enter in to a time of worship and prayer. As you light your candle repeat the following words)*

We light a candle today to remind us  
that there is a mysterious power or presence that connects us all -  
we call it God.  
that this mysterious presence dwells within each of us -  
as it did in the person of Jesus whom we call the Christ.  
that we *cannot* be separated from this presence that is  
the Spirit of love which created us and that is part of us always.

**Call to Worship:**

God is good; God's steadfast love lasts forever.  
Know it! Believe it! Proclaim it!  
Those who thirst for wisdom are satisfied;  
those who hunger for inspiration are filled!

Imprisoned ones find freedom;  
 The powerful are humbled;  
 The needy are raised up from their distress!  
 God *is* good!  
 Come, let us worship in gratitude together.

**Hymn:** God is Here (spoken) **VU 389**

- 1 God is here! As we your people  
 meet to offer praise and prayer,  
 may we find in fuller measure  
 what it is in Christ we share.  
 Here, as in the world around us,  
 all our varied skills and arts  
 wait the coming of the Spirit  
 into open minds and hearts.
  
- 2 Here are symbols to remind us  
 of our lifelong need of grace;  
 here are table, font, and pulpit;  
 here the cross has central place.  
 Here in honesty of preaching,  
 here in silence, as in speech,  
 here, in newness and renewal,  
 God the Spirit comes to each.
  
- 3 Here our children find a welcome  
 in the Shepherd's flock and fold;  
 here as bread and wine are taken,  
 Christ sustains us, as of old.  
 Here the servants of the Servant  
 seek in worship to explore  
 what it means in daily living  
 to believe and to adore.
  
- 4 God of all, of church and kingdom,  
 in an age of change and doubt  
 keep us faithful to the gospel;  
 help us work your purpose out.  
 Here, in this day's dedication,  
 all we have to give, receive;  
 we, who cannot live without you,  
 we adore you! We believe!

**Words of Wisdom:** What Good is It? (Kabir)

What good is it if the scholar pores over words and points of this and that but their chest is not soaked dark with love?

What good is it if the ascetic clothes themselves in saffron robes but is colourless within?

What good is it if you scrub your ethical behaviour till it shines, but there is no music inside?

**Opening Prayer/Prayer of Confession:**

Holy Presence, we give thanks and rejoice in the wholeness found through Spirit. Open us in this time of worship to the peace that can be ours when we honour and integrate all parts of ourselves - body, mind and spirit - into one healthy whole. Open us to Spirit working in and through us as we take this time to focus on your presence in our lives.

Sometimes we feel like wanderers in the wilderness, O God, not sure which way to turn and feeling lost and alone. Help us to remember even the wilderness, even the desert, can be a place of life and healing, and that with you we can face our fears. Help us to remember that you are always with us. Amen.

**Words of Assurance:**

As sure as the sun rises we can be assured that God is with us.  
When we open to the love of Holy Mystery we are guided, supported and filled with peace. Believe this, rejoice and know that even your darkest secrets are known and forgiven!  
Thanks be to God.

**Ministry of Music:** Vocalise - duet for flute and piano - by Rachmaninoff  
-played by Colleen Weber and Linda-Mae Ogilvie

**Scripture:** Numbers 21:4-9 (The Inclusive Bible: the First Egalitarian Edition)  
(A bronze serpent heals the people)

The Israelites travelled from Mount Hor along the road to the Sea of Reeds in order to avoid Edom. But the people grew impatient along the way, and they addressed their concerns to God and Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? We have no bread! We have no water! And we are disgusted with this terrible food!"

Then YHWH sent venomous snakes among the people. They fatally bit many of the people. So the people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against YHWH and against you. Intercede for us, and ask that God remove the snakes from us."

So Moses prayed for the people. And YHWH said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it on the end of a pole. Anyone who is bitten and looks at it will live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then whenever the people were bitten by a snake, they looked at the bronze snake and lived.

**Scripture:** John 3:1-21 (The Inclusive Bible: the First Egalitarian Edition)  
(Nicodemus goes to Jesus in the night)

A certain Pharisee named Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, came to Jesus at night. "Rabbi," he said, "we know you are a teacher come from God, for no one can perform the signs and wonders you do, unless by the power of God."

Jesus gave Nicodemus this answer: "The truth of the matter is, unless one is born from above, one cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said, "How can an adult be born a second time? I can't go back into my mother's womb to be born again!"

Jesus replied: "The truth of the matter is, no one can enter God's kingdom without being

born of water and the Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is Spirit. So don't be surprised when I tell you that you must be born from above. The wind blows where it will. You hear the sound it makes, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

"How can this be possible?" Asked Nicodemus.

Jesus replied, "You're a teacher of Israel, and you still don't understand these matters? The truth of the matter is, we are talking about what we know; we are testifying about what we've seen - yet you don't accept our testimony. If you don't believe when I tell you about earthly things, how will you believe when I tell you about heavenly things?"

No one has gone up to heaven except the One who came down from heaven - the Chosen One. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Chosen One must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in the Chosen one might have eternal life.

Yes, God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life. God sent the Only Begotten into the world not to condemn the world, but that through the Only Begotten the world might be saved. Whoever believes in the Only Begotten avoids judgment, but whoever doesn't believe is judged already for not believing in the name of the Only Begotten of God.

On these grounds is sentence pronounced: that though the light came into the world, people showed they preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. Indeed, people who do wrong hate the light and avoid it, for fear their actions will be exposed; but people who live by the truth come out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what they do is done in God."

### **Message: Water and Spirit**

John 3:1-21    Numbers 21:4-9

The reading from John's gospel this morning is one of those that is very familiar to many of us. My guess is that most people watching today (including me) has a past history with it, or at least parts of it, and therefore, also has a whole series of suppositions and interpretations that we bring with us. However, as with any familiar scripture, if we want to learn something fresh and startling we need to try to listen to it as if we are hearing it for the first time, paying attention to what is actually there.

First, a word about John's gospel. The other three Gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - are known as the synoptic Gospels because they are similar and share many of the same stories. We could think of them as short, documentary movies. John's Gospel, on the other hand can be thought of as a totem pole, a series of symbols stacked one on top of the other: light, bread, life, truth, water. We suspect that the relationship between these images means something, but we aren't sure what - although one thing we can be sure of is that whatever they mean it isn't logical or linear. John's gospel is one long series of metaphors. A metaphor is a word or phrase that is used to represent something else, and the only way into a metaphor is through your right brain, through puns, parables, proverbs, pictures and poetry.

Our world today prefers sound bytes to parables, prose over poetry and facts over proverbs so it can cause us some difficulty and impatience when we try to understand what this writer is trying to say. So let's have a look at this peculiar story.

The story begins at night, which, in this Gospel, can mean a state of being rather than a specific time of day. Most probably a state of dreaming, of right-brain activity. The Celtic

tradition might say it is “a thin place,” a place where everyday existence and the mystery that is God meet. A place where an old way of being brushes up against a new perspective.

This story isn't about a stupid man meeting a smart man, or an unperceptive man meeting a perceptive one. The text tells us that this meeting is between two teachers: one highly experienced (Nicodemus) and one relatively new (Jesus). In other words, we are eavesdropping on two professionals speaking in the jargon of their profession. But remember: this is John's gospel; this is not merely a story, it is a metaphor.

Metaphors, by their nature, hold two unlike things in relationship. I think here, in this metaphor, we are seeing traditional wisdom or a familiar 'way of knowing' grating up against a new perspective and that new perspective is highlighting a fault line that runs through the old.

Nicodemus has come to Jesus because he feels uneasy about something. He knows what he has been taught and what he, in turn, teaches others, but he also knows that there is something in what this Jesus says that also rings true. He is what we would call today a seeker. A person who is searching for answers to the big questions of life. Someone who finds that what they have been taught and what they know doesn't quite answer all the questions that he has. A person who is questioning his own beliefs and wants to know more. A person who has a hunger to be filled on a deeper level, a spiritual level.

Nicodemus can see that some of what Jesus says and does fits with the old ideas but there is much that doesn't. There is much that Jesus says that makes sense on one level but Nicodemus can't quite fit it into the larger framework that he knows so well. So he comes to ask questions and try to find out. Unfortunately, his conversation with Jesus raises even more questions. He doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about when he says “one must be born of water and Spirit.” He doesn't seem to understand talk of Spirit at all. Which brings us to the intersection which I spoke about a moment ago.

Jesus is talking about a way of being that is based on connection with the Spirit and Nicodemus is talking about living a life in accordance with the law. These are two very different philosophies. Here we see the two ways colliding - the old and the new, the ways of spirit and the ways of the world, the ways of seen and unseen things. Surprisingly, there is a thread that runs through them both, that connects them. The thread is the Spirit. The fault line in the old way is the absence of the Spirit. The law came into existence because of humanity's connection with Spirit, because of someone's personal experience of, and connection with Great Mystery but that knowledge has been lost.

Jesus emphasizes how far apart these two can become and points out to Nicodemus how difficult it will be for him to embrace this “new” way of thinking and being. It will require a complete turn around, a complete re-organizing of all that Nicodemus knows and has been taught. It will require trust in unseen things. It will require much courage and determination and it will require him to open his mind and heart to letting the Spirit of God inform him, lead him and guide him. God's help will be needed, Jesus says, but that isn't a problem because God loves the world and God loves him and has sent Jesus to show the way.

I don't know about you but I identify closely with Nicodemus in this story. I would also call myself a seeker and I meet people every day who fit this category, too. People who say to me “What I learned in Sunday school and what I often hear in church just doesn't make sense to me anymore. There has to be more to it.” My response is, yes, there has to be and I believe there is.

You see, we get just as caught up as Nicodemus in the day to day living of this world.

We get just as distracted by practical things as he did in his day. We get just as blinded by what has been passed down to us. It is much easier to simply accept what we are told to believe and leave it at that, but there are some of us for whom that is not enough. There are some of us who want to experience the Divine Presence for ourselves, who want to be filled at our deepest level with the certainty that we are loved no matter what. There are some of us who find it easier than others to do the work that is necessary to change our perspective. There are some of us who are willing to risk opening our minds and hearts to listen and learn and embrace new ways of thinking and being. There are some of us who want to know all there is to know.

But it isn't always easy. We do still have to live in this world after all. The age of reason and the emphasis on scientific method keeps us in the dark spiritually, so to speak. But sometimes that doesn't make sense to me, either. It doesn't make sense that we can place our trust in modern day things which can't be seen. We have no difficulty placing our trust in electricity, in radio waves and microwaves and whatever other waves are out there that also can't be seen. And, yes, I know that these things can be proven by what they do. But there are other unseen things which we believe in that can't be proven. Love is one. We talk and sing about love all the time but it can't be seen and it can't be proven scientifically. We can't see the wind either but we know it is there because we can see what it does and we can feel it on our skin. I believe that the Spirit is just as real. I think the spirit can be seen by what it does and I think it can be felt, too. We just don't want to see it, or we can't see it because we aren't open to it.

Moses was open to it. He believed and trusted in an unseen God who communicated to him through what is described as a burning bush that he was to go back to Egypt and lead the people out of slavery. And there have been many, many others who were open to that unseen presence. The Bible is full of stories about an unseen God interacting with humans in many different ways.

Why should it be any different today? Why is it so difficult for us to think that the same Spirit that interacted with all those ancient people might be there for us, too? I believe that God (which I describe as the life force of the universe that is in, around and part of everything there is) is always available to us, in fact, we cannot be separated from it. So why wouldn't we incorporate it into our daily living? Why wouldn't we consult with the deepest part of ourselves just as we consult with the internet or books or teachers or friends to help us in our daily living? It just makes sense to me.

Sometimes it is simply because we don't like change and we don't want to do the difficult inner work to turn our lives around. The reading from the book of Numbers is an example of the way many people today think. It is another story of the old against the new, the familiar versus the unknown, the status quo versus change. The people fleeing slavery in Egypt have been on the road long enough for their initial excitement to wear off. They are finding the journey challenging and have started complaining to Moses about it. They are beginning to think they had been better off living in slavery - at least there they knew what to expect. They may have been slaves but, at least they had had food and water regularly. But now life had become uncomfortable. Jesus makes reference to the story in speaking with Nicodemus. He uses the image of the brass snake on the pole as a metaphor for his mission.

We need to note here that when Jesus likens himself to the brass serpent that Moses "lifted up so that everyone who believes in the Chosen one might have eternal life" he is referring to the eternal Christ Spirit that lives through him - remember John's metaphor at the beginning of his gospel about the Word existing from the beginning of time. He does not mean

that everyone who is not a Christian is not “saved”.

Jesus came to ‘save’ us from ourselves by teaching and showing what it means to live completely in accord with Spirit, which means living with love, acceptance, compassion and so on. His life is our example of how to be fully human and to be fully human we need to know, honour, and respect all parts of ourselves - body, mind and Spirit. To be fully human we need to embrace our spiritual selves and that means letting the unseen forces of Spirit inform us, lead us, and guide us every day, in all things, all the time. It is just as Jesus told Nicodemus - we need to be born of water and spirit.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

### **Preparation for Prayer:**

*As we prepare our hearts and minds to enter into a time of prayer I invite you to sit comfortably and quietly for a moment. Breathe deeply a few times paying particular attention to your breath as it moves in through your nostrils and fills your lungs. Picture your breath as a light entering your body and filling it with love and relaxation. Then when you exhale imagine the breath taking all your tensions and worries with it as it leaves your body. Do this a few times until you feel relaxed then move on into the prayer time.*

### **Silent Preparation:**

#### **Prayers:**

I am not alone. I know a presence around me, in the air I breathe within me, in the sounds I hear beyond me, and know their source streams from the great love that brings and blesses all life, always there, streaming from the birthplace of all things.

Remind us, Infinite Wisdom that there is no grief or longing that we cannot share with you. With confidence we pray for all the long days and lonely nights, the unmet dreams, the cries in the wilderness, the inconsolable pain, the half good-byes, the relationships without resolve, the truths left unsaid, the sighs and tears that words cannot express.

When we feel alone, God, remind us of your presence. When we feel broken, remind us of all that you have made whole and give us the strength to hold on.

Today we mark one year since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and we pray for a world plunged into turmoil because of it. We pray for lives taken, and for the loved ones grieving their loss; we pray for those who have lost jobs and sources of income; we pray for those suffering mental and emotional challenges because of isolation and social restrictions; we pray for medical staff and first responders, for truckers and delivery personnel and store clerks who go to work everyday risking their own health to provide for our needs; we pray for teachers and educators as they work to educate our children in safe ways; we pray for governments and leaders who are trying to do what is best for all of us. It has been a difficult year, O God. Give us the courage and patience to persevere for a bit longer.

We pray today for our brothers and sisters of Paisley United Church and for all those who work on our behalf in other parts of our country and the world. And we pray for ourselves as we share our individual concerns and thanksgivings. Hear the prayers of our hearts... (silence)...

Let us always remember - we are not alone. We are loved by Love itself, that will never let go. We move in its delicious vastness. We are drifters on your ocean of love and we give thanks for are good.

We offer these and all of our prayers in the name of our brother, Jesus the Christ, who stand among us as we pray together the prayer he taught us saying...

### **Lord's Prayer:**

Our Father who art in heaven,  
     hallowed be thy name,  
     thy kindom come,  
     thy will be done,  
     on earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,  
 And forgive us our trespasses,  
     as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,  
     but deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kindom, the power, and the glory  
     forever and ever. Amen.

### **Offering:**

If you would like to do your part by making a monetary donation to Melville United Church, there are a number of ways to do that.

1. *Cheque (post-dated cheques are welcome): made payable to: Melville United Church - which can be mailed to the church at P.O. Box 41, Fergus, ON N1M 2W7 or put in the mail slot beside the parking lot door.*
2. *Donate online through the Canada Helps website*  
<https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/melville-united-church>
3. *Call Lynda, to arrange Pre-Authorized Remittance payments (PAR).*
4. *E-transfer directly from your bank. E-mail to [secretary@melvilleunited.com](mailto:secretary@melvilleunited.com)*

### **Offering Prayer:**

Divine Friend, we choose to give, as a way of giving thanks - for the gifts that we have received, for the love that we have shared, for the healing we have experienced. May our contributions serve to further your work of love in this world. Amen.

### **Hymn: Spirit God, Be Our Breath** MV 150

Spirit God: be our breath, be our song.  
 Blow through us, bringing strength to move on.  
 Our world seems inward, defensive, withdrawn...  
 Spirit God, be our song.

Patient God: soothe our pride, calm our fear.  
 Comfort us. When we know you are near  
 we grow more certain, our vision is clear.

Patient God, calm our fear.  
Loving God: be our voice, be our prayer.  
Reaching out, joining hands as we share,  
we seek your guidance through friendship and care.  
Loving God, be our prayer.

Spirit God: be our breath, be our song.  
Blow through us, bringing strength to move on.  
Through change, through challenge, we'll greet the new dawn...  
Spirit God, be our song.

**Blessing/Sending Forth:**

Go now remembering that there is more to you than just a body,  
Wholeness lies in acknowledging and caring for all parts of you - body, mind *and* spirit.  
Go, knowing and believing that you are loved more than you can ever imagine.  
Go now, knowing the love of God, the peace of Christ and the companionship of the  
Holy Spirit is with you - always! Amen.

**Postlude:**

**Prayer of the Week:**

Eternal One, we choose to give thanks for the presence of Spirit in our lives. We are showered with extravagant love and invited to respond with our love, thanks, and praise. Your love and grace inspire us to act justly in the world. Help us to choose to trust in your presence and your love for us all. Amen.