

Lent 4B: Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

Have you ever had that experience of picking up a chocolate, perhaps a handmade truffle, and you don't know what's inside and if you are going to like what you find. So you take that nibbling bite and the outward chocolate shell is a little bit harder to get through to the center than you thought—it doesn't just melt in your mouth. So you take another bite and nibble your way in. When all of a sudden you hit the soft center and it's a surprising zinger! Delicious! Amazing! That's what this gospel reminds me of: a chocolate where the center is hidden and you're not sure if you are going to find it, but when you do...Wowza! A taste sensation that wakes up your whole mouth. What is at the center, at the heart is a game-changer. If sweets and chocolates aren't your thing (or if you've given them up for Lent), then consider the center of the labyrinth on the front of the bulletin and all of the twists and turns that you have to take to get to that center.

The first nibble (or twist, if you are following the labyrinth) is making our way through the first reading from Numbers. The more attention you pay to that story, the more questions emerge. The people are free, but all they do is complain. So God sends serpents to bite and kill - extreme at best—and then Moses follows God's guidance to put a bronze likeness of a poisonous snake on a stick to look at it, in order to live. (My working title for this outlandish and frankly ridiculous story is *Holding up a serpent and other solutions that make no sense.*)

The second nibble or twist, if you are following the labyrinth, is the dualistic language of light and dark. We live in an era where we are attuned to the dangers of associating colors and shades with values, particularly when it comes to skin tones. So it is hard to hear John associating light only with good and dark with evil. Barbara Brown Taylor describes the problem this way: "It divides every day in two, pitting the light part against the dark part. It tucks all the sinister stuff into the dark part, identifying God with the sunny part and leaving you to deal with the rest on your own. It implies things about dark-skinned people and sight-impaired people that are not true." This nibble or twist is important to acknowledge. I suspect that John knew, as well as you and I do, that we need the dark as much as the light in order to flourish. All living things do. (Daylight savings debates revolve around our natural cycle of light and dark.)

Belief is another word that can give pause. Where Matthew put it this way: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," (Matthew 6:21) John asks, "Where is your heart this day? What do you put your heart into? Where do you invest your heart?" But that can cause a dualistic separation between heart and head—follow your heart, ignore your intellect—and that isn't quite it either. So here is a slight shift from Marcus Borg. He says it's not a question of believing in, but rather believing. Believing God. (see *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*) According to John, believing God fully means believing all that God loves. In other words, "If you believe that Jesus is the light of the world—if you believe Jesus as the light of the world—it will spur you to generous and generative actions of believing." "Make your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light," Barry Lopez wrote. (p. 171 in *Earth's Echo: Sacred Encounters with Nature*) He might have been paraphrasing John.

There might be some other unexpected nibbles or twists and turns that came up for you. I would not be surprised. This short gospel is so full. But finally, we get to the delicious, unexpected, wildly surprising center of this gospel: *For God so loved the world that God gave...* This is so familiar to most of us that even if you did not grow up going to church, you can probably finish that sentence. (Remember the camera at sports events panning to the John 3:16 poster at half-time?)

For God so beloved the world that God gave..." All of scripture, from beginning to end, is a description of that action, of God loving the world and loving it so much that God gave. How people have finished that sentence in particular places and in particular times changes, not as a replacement, but as an addition, like a love poem that just keeps getting longer and longer.

In the beginning of Genesis, God so (be)loved the world that God gave definition to the chaos, creating beautiful diversity of wind, sea and stars, seas and rivers, mountains and valleys, flora and fauna, and people. And God so loved the world that God called all of it—the light and the dark—good. Then, God so loved the world that God set a rainbow in the sky for Noah as a promise to keep loving all the world and all in the world, in our magnificent diversity. Then, God so loved the world that God established a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, a vow of commitment to them and their descendents. Then, God so loved the world for and with David and Ruth and Naomi and the Widow of Zaraphath and so on. We can move through scripture, through the big stories and the small ones, the kings and prophets and the widows and those left seemingly left behind.

And then John adds his part. In this moment, in our time, John writes, *God so (be)loved the world that...* And then he goes on to complete that sentence in a radically new way for his community and all those seeking to follow the ways of Jesus: *for God so loved the world as to give the only Begotten One.* (Inclusive Bible translation) This is the zinger at the center, at the heart.

Just this week, we might say God so (be)loved the world that against all odds and a late snow, the crocuses and daffodils are in bloom again. And God so (be)loved the world that in the most unexpected ways, people show up for one another. And God so (be)loved the world that on this Mothering Sunday of Lent how amazing is it to hear that there are worm-like amphibians (not mammals) in Brazil that appear to feed their offspring with a fatty milk-like substance. Evidence of this intricate creation where giving and nurturing is found in creatures who live underground, in the dark, who were previously thought to be indifferent or unengaged with their offspring. God is nimble, shifting and showing love and belovedness in new ways, all the time. Here is what it looks like here. Here is what it looks like there. Even in the most difficult times. Even in the context of the most ridiculous story about people being saved by looking at the bronze head of a serpent on a stick. There are at least two questions we are left to wonder about: God so (be)loved the world that... How do you finish that sentence this week? And How are we being asked to follow that nimble believing God, to do ridiculous things on behalf of loving and believing that we haven't done before?