

4th Sunday in Lent (B), March 10, 2024
John 3:14-21, Numbers 21:4-9

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

All human beings, at some fundamental level, have a sense that the world as it is is not the world as it is meant to be. In the Christian tradition, we use the categories of sin and evil to name what is out of alignment with the divine intention for the world. Our second creation story in Genesis chapter 3, the story of the first humans eating fruit from the forbidden tree at the instigation of the talking serpent, is meant, at least in part, to separate in our minds God's intention for the world from the condition we now find ourselves in. It helps us to think about what *our* role is in all of this. It means that we don't get to blame the state of the world on outside forces alone. In other words, we don't get to say that we are simply the victims of circumstance, but that we have some responsibility for perpetuating and collaborating with the forces that have brought the world to be in a condition that it needs saving from. Our first readings over the past three weeks, are about God addressing this condition. The first was the Noah story, in which God floods the earth and saves only the best of the best in a kind of do-over. That didn't go so well, so God promised never to do that again. Then God chooses Abraham and Sarah to work with to be a kind of leaven in the dough of humankind. God blesses them so that they would be a conduit for God blessing all the people of the world. Then last week we had God's giving of the Ten Commandments to the children of Israel after freeing them from captivity in Egypt. Jesus summed this up as a double Great Commandment: love God and love your fellow human beings. He clarified what he meant by the latter in the so-called Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And yet history and present experience show that we are not really very good at any of this, being a blessing for others or following the commandments. So what is the answer? What is the solution? How does our faith address our part in what is wrong with the world and empower us to change both our attitude and our actions to align them with God's good intentions for us?

Today's Gospel reading from the third chapter of John goes in perhaps a different direction from the origin stories I just briefly talked us through and gives us something more universal and basic in the human experience. We get some version of this reading a number of times over the lectionary's three-year cycle, but only in today's version do we get the full context for that famous verse 16 about God's love for the world and the promise of faith. Jesus is talking here to the Pharisee Nicodemus. We usually think of the Pharisees as Jesus' opponents in the Gospels, which they were. But it's important to recognize also that they were also the closest group to Jesus' teaching. Don't we tend to fight most with those we're closest to? Family conflict is as old as families, as the story of Cain and Abel illustrates. So it's not surprising that Jesus starts with a common story, the story of Israelites in the wilderness after their escape from Egypt. We have that as our first reading this morning. That's probably a story that makes you uncomfortable. It makes *me* uncomfortable. I don't like that God is named as the cause of the snakes who start killing the Israelites. I would prefer to explain that away. But I think it's better if we live with our discomfort with God here so that we don't miss what is happening in Jesus. The people in the story from Numbers have turned against God and against Moses. They have come to the point where they regret being brought out of Egypt. They're complaining, in other words, about their own salvation! They complain that there is no food and no water, in spite of the fact that God has given them both food and water. I love how in the same sentence they say that there is no food, and then "we detest this miserable food." Have you ever stood in front of a refrigerator full of food and said, "there's

nothing to eat”? That’s what is going on here. There is food, but not food that they want to eat. And so they’re ready to go back into slavery for the sake of better food. How’s that as a metaphor for the human condition, our willingness to sell our souls for what we think will make us happy? God’s response is to make things even worse for them. The goal is to stop them from going back to Egypt and to drive them into God’s arms. The bronze serpent serves to demonstrate that their only real hope is in God. It’s still a disturbing story, I grant you that, especially in our cultural context that puts such an emphasis on the individual.

Jesus uses this story to point to himself as the only real hope for the world. But there is an important shift here. This time the suffering will be endured not by God’s people, but by God’s very self, the Word-made-flesh. But then Jesus moves away from this familiar story to something more fundamental and universal, something that goes back to the very beginning of creation in Genesis, something common to the experience of all people, that everyone can relate to, the difference between darkness and light, between night and day. Darkness is danger and insecurity. It’s where evil is done. Thieves and bandits use the cover of darkness to steal and murder. They don’t want you to see them coming, or to know who they are in the light of day. And this is true both literally and metaphorically. Corruption thrives in keeping things in the dark – in backroom deals, in the misappropriation of funds, in bribing those with influence and power to gain unfair advantage, to create systems that benefit some at the expense of others, systems that create great wealth for some at the expense of crippling poverty for many others. If we could see these things happening, we wouldn’t let them happen. But the problem is that we are not just victims of circumstances, as I said earlier. We are aiders and abettors. “This is the judgment,” Jesus says, “that the light has come into the darkness, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” We have learned to use the darkness to our own advantage, to trust the cover of night to hide our self-interested motives so that we can go on serving ourselves.

God knows that that can lead only to our doom. But just as God will not let the Israelites fall back into slavery, so God will not abandon us to perish in the darkness. God has come after us in Jesus Christ, a light in the darkness, to expose the foolish hopelessness of the path we have chosen, and to drive us back into light and life. Let’s be real, though. Turning us away from our love of the darkness is a painful process. But it’s pain that God shares and takes on in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in order to reopen the way for us to life as God intended it, life that really is life, life that we can delight in. And that life knows no bounds, not even the bounds of death.

The world as it is is not the world as it is meant to be. But in Jesus Christ God is doing something about that. So, may God grant us grace and the power of the Holy Spirit to trust God’s persistent good intentions for us in Jesus, so that we may be drawn from darkness into light, from death in to life. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.