

God So Loved the World

Fourth Sunday in Lent
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Can't recall exactly when it began, or how it began. All I remember is that, maybe three years ago or so, at our weekly church staff meeting, Pastor Brock and I discovered we both had similar household appliances on the blink. Not strange, you say? Well, listen on. See, we usually begin staff meetings here at Trinity by going around the table and saying how our week was. Our pastors and vicar, program staff and office staff individually offer a few words about how things have been going in our lives. Some folks say only a few words, and we need to prompt them. Others of us are more naturally verbose, and need to be . . . quiet.

One day Pastor Brock and I learned we both had to purchase new hot water heaters. Not long after that, it was something else we both had to have repaired. Since then we've had refrigerators to replace and motor vehicle malfunctions at roughly the same time. It is truly strange. Even if the problems aren't exactly the same, there is something weird about it all. For example, when Pastor Brock's well went dry, it wasn't that **our** well went dry. The Eastons live in Camp Hill borough, and do not have a well. But **his** well went dry at the same time **we** were experiencing water pressure **increases** through the Pennsylvania Water Company. The Brocks had no water; the Eastons had too much water. Today the Brocks have a new well; the Eastons have a new water pressure reducer and surge tank. Now I suppose it's our checking accounts that suffer from a similar problem!

If there is some cause-and-effect with sharing our news with each other at staff meeting; if there is some connectivity between Pastor Brock and Pastor Easton, then I can't wait for the day he comes into staff meeting and says, "I just won the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes!" I'll go home that day knowing the Sweepstakes patrol is at my front door too!

So, it's become a running joke at staff meeting that when one of us is experiencing appliance troubles, we ask, out of curiosity, if the other is experiencing the same. But I find I hesitate to mention a household problem, as if I am some kind of "Typhoid Mary" for the Brock household. Perhaps Pastor Brock feels the same way about himself with me. So, should I mention to him that my son's Xbox game system had to be sent away recently for repairs? Or that our computer crashed and burned 2 weeks ago? Every time Pastor Brock looks at me, I don't want him anxiously thinking, "Okay, what's the next thing about to break?" I don't want Pastor Brock to look on me with fear and foreboding. I want us to be able to look on each other as colleague and friend, as a partner in ministry here at Trinity. I want us to be able to look on each other, even if neither one of us ever wins the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes, and think, "When I look at my fellow pastor, I feel hopeful about the future; I feel good about life."

Now I bring all this up because there is something weird going on in our Old Testament lesson, too. The Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness for years—so near and yet so far from the land promised them by the Lord God. They have complained about many things along the way, but by this point in their wanderings they begin to complain against God. As punishment, poisonous snakes come upon the Israelites and bite them. Those bitten die from this calamity and the people beg for God’s mercy. So Moses intercedes for them with the Lord God, imploring God to take those serpents away. What the writer of Numbers tells us is quite interesting. He doesn’t tell us that the Lord God took **away** the poisonous serpents, but rather, that God had Moses fashion a bronze serpent and set it atop a pole, and then inform God’s people that anyone bitten by those serpents need only look upon this bronze serpent and they would live.

How strange that the Israelites should be compelled to look upon the likeness of the very thing that only brought terror and death, the very thing that had been punishment for their wrongful deeds! You’d think it would be traumatic—to look upon the likeness of a serpent, even if inanimate. Yet now they are commanded to gaze upon that likeness, not in fear but in hope, and find life restored, healing in a glance. Look on the bronze serpent lifted up, and suddenly find a future awaiting them, new life a possibility. And know that the Lord God was the One who was bringing that life into reality for them.

The bronze serpent is mentioned again later on in scripture. It seems the memory of this event in the wilderness wanderings was so profound that the bronze serpent on a pole was eventually placed in the Temple in Jerusalem. However, what we learn in 2 Kings 18 is that some people actually began to worship the serpent on the pole, instead of worshiping the God who provided it. Eventually King Hezekiah in a period of religious reform has the bronze serpent destroyed, broken into pieces.

You know, today’s story in Numbers reminds me of vaccinations where the vaccines contained live pox, and those things were injected into people in order to make them immune to that particular disease. Or, just this past week, I read of promising experiments with children ingesting small amounts of peanut dust in order to conquer severe peanut allergies. Don’t you suppose those involved in the experiments had some amount of anxiety at the thought of absorbing the peanut dust? Don’t you suppose the parents of those children with severe peanut allergies were worried sick during these experiments, even if doctors were set to rescue them from anaphylactic shock at a moment’s notice? And so don’t you suppose the Israelites found it difficult to look upon that bronze serpent on a pole? For the Israelites, this required complete trust in the Lord God, who was capable of weal **and** woe, blessings **and** curses.

Knowing this ancient story brings clarity to Jesus’ words in our Gospel lesson. In this 3rd chapter John records Jesus having a conversation with a Jewish religious authority named Nicodemus, a Pharisee who had come to Jesus secretly at night to ask questions. He wanted to learn from this wise Jesus who seemed to have such a deep relationship with God, and a knowledge of God’s ways. These were things Nicodemus himself was seeking. Jesus says a variety of things to Nicodemus, but then he offers these words that we heard today: *And 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 Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

In other words, this same God, who long ago saved his people by calling them to look upon the bronze serpent lifted up before them, would now save his people by having them look upon the Son, Jesus, lifted up. Lifted up on a cross. Like the image of the serpent, this was not a pretty thing to view. It was a call to gaze upon a horrific sight, a man on an instrument of torture, an innocent man condemned and dying and suffering unimaginably. Now, don't you suppose the very idea of looking on this human form being executed like a criminal—much less considering it to be a major symbol in worship—made no sense to most people outside the Christian faith? Why, it might even have produced some fear and anxiety for those within the faith! If you recall last week's 2nd lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul said the cross was foolishness to the Greeks, who were always seeking wisdom, always seeking that which seemed rational and reasonable. Christ crucified sounded strange and ridiculous to the ear, a terrible event to view. And yet John's Gospel says we are commanded to look at Jesus Christ lifted up on the cross and find hope there, hope for the future, new life our reality.

The familiarity of John's Gospel here sometimes fools us into thinking we can learn nothing new from it. But one of the reasons these lessons come up every three years is so we can plumb their depths and let the Spirit help us discover new things God would have us understand this day. I was reading a commentary on this text by New Testament professor Sarah Henrich of Luther Seminary. Our tendency is to think the word "so" in *God so loved the world . . .* is referring to how much God loves the world. I know that many times when I read this verse, I emphasize the "so" (*God so loved the world*) as if to say, "God loved the world **so much . . .**" Which God does. But Professor Henrich suggests that the proper translation of that "so" is "just so" or "in this way." That means it would be more accurate to render the verse like this: This is the way God loved the world . . . Jesus on the cross is the way God loved the world.

You know, there are a lot of ways God could have loved the world. He could have made the sun shine every day, wherever we are. (I know that doesn't happen—I just spent three days up in northern Pennsylvania with my folks, and it snowed.) God could have made all of the raindrops be lemon drops and gumdrops. God could have loved Pastor Brock and me by making sure the Publishers Clearinghouse Sweepstakes patrol came to our respective houses. God could have removed every challenge or obstacle you and I face, leaving only smooth paths for achieving our hearts' desires. (There are days we probably wish that was the way God loved the world.) Instead, says John, God loved the world in a very particular way through a very particular event: The event of Jesus on the cross. We are to look there, and in the looking, we will begin to grasp the amazing love God has for you and me and all the world. Like the early Christians who heard John's Gospel, we are to place our trust in Jesus lifted up on the cross. For when we believe God gave his Son to us in such a way—strange and foolish as it may appear to the world—we are promised that Jesus' death brings about real consequences for us who look to the Crucified One. Consequences of forgiveness, healing, and eternal life. And these words about eternal life aren't simply referring to life after death. John also used such a phrase in his Gospel to indicate the quality of life available now with God. The quality of life Nicodemus sought. The quality of life where we can deeply experience God each and every day as we are continually shaped by his cross of love.

So, look to Jesus lifted up . . . and live. **AMEN.**

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