

March 10, 2024 4th Sunday of Lent
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

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

[Fosdick Lecture at Augsburg University: <https://www.augsburg.edu/campusministry/fosdick/> YouTube of the lecture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oRGeJ2LgHY&t=3409s>; ideas from Working Preacher and Sermon Brainwave, both for this date: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-john-314-21-6>; with phrases from my own sermons from this Sunday in 2018 and 2021]

Grace and healing, love, immeasurable love to you, beloved, of Christ Jesus. Amen.

Thickening the texts.

A friend recently introduced me to the idea of Thickening.

I keep thinking of making graving, standing at the stove, attentive to the texture, the layers of taste.

But here we're talking about Thickening the sacred stories, the stories of our ancestors in the faith,

Jesus and Nicodemus, Moses and the people, so many ancestors.

Thickening, appreciating the complexity of their stories, their lives, their faith,

the intersections, the realities, the multidimensions.

Thickening the stories that for one reason or another have been simplified, maybe, I dare say, at a loss.

All week long I've been musing about our passages for this morning.

Struggling, really. Tangly is how I've felt about them, tangly, tangled up.

I mean, this is John 3:16 we're talking about, isn't it?

"3: colon 16" they sometimes abbreviate it, when they print the bumper stickers,

or contract the people to make the banners that get pulled taut,

behind home base at the ball games,

or at the best angle in the football stadium,

the better to remind the viewers, that God loves the world.

Anything that can be shortened to 3 digits and one punctuation mark, and still recognized,

I give that some credit.

"The gospel in miniature," Martin Luther called it. The heart of the gospel.

And yet these verses get tangly, *for me at least*, in how our culture has used them:

when they take on an exclusionary tone,

or when people use them as a threat, while smiling: Believe it or else.

Now friends, I believe that God does love the world, I'll preach that any day,

that's not what I'm feeling tangly about.

But it's how these passages, really, *this* passage, gets used, that's what I am feeling tangly about.

And that's where the thickening comes in.

Narrative therapy reminds us that we can have different realities of the same story,
that there are elements of our own narratives that may have become hidden, and can be uncovered,
that a new story can be shared.

When we thicken the story, we notice these tangles.

We slow down enough to understand them,
to blessedly, honestly, tease them apart, and hear them for their truth.

Our passage from John is the tail end of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Remember Nicodemus?

Nicodemus has come by night, a Jewish leader risking it all,
driven by curiosity, yearning: How can we be born of the Spirit?
Nicodemus is searching, reaching to understand and trust.

As they talk, Jesus recalls to Nicodemus that old story from the time of the Exodus,
our first reading this morning.

Surely Nicodemus knows it well and can imagine in his mind's-eye the Israelites,
weary from the years on the move,
cranky about the food,
impatient-as-any, forgetting why this journey is important.

This strange story of the bronze serpent, hoisted upon a pole, Nicodemus would have known it.

And he would have recalled, too,
how the people were healed by facing their struggle to trust the one who led them through the night.

With that story filling the space between them,
it's Nicodemus, who hears close-up these promises of Jesus:
It's okay, I've got it, you can trust me,
you all are healed, you all have life,
the world has life, now love each other, care for each other.

Continuing in the spirit of thickening these passages, let's do just a bit more bible study about John 3.

Grab your bulletin...

You've heard the context, framed as this night-time conversation with Nicodemus.

But by these later verses, there are clues that John, so many generations after Jesus lived,
is writing to the synagogue of his time, and to the wider community.

The same care Pastor Maria mentioned last week about the potential of anti-Semitism

thickens this passage too, and the reality that Jesus is Jewish and so are many in his community.

Often John 3:16 stands alone: *“For God so loved the world that God gave the Son, the only begotten one, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

Actually the next verse is part of that same thought and so important:

“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.”

That’s John 3:17. If you’re going to toss around John 3:16, I’d suggest including John 3:17 also.

Jesus isn’t about condemning, Jesus is about saving.

Now that word Save, or Salvation is important.

The word Salvation comes from the word for healing.

This passage, then, is about healing, and a wide understanding of healing.

We are made whole, we know belonging, eternal life.

In John’s gospel this healing is all about relationship, abiding.

This is so much less about individual salvation, am I going to heaven when I die?

And so much more about our interconnection, now and into the future,

having a place in the community of Christ,

an abiding place, being part of the flock, held in relationship through all time.

My friends, in this mixed up, complicated world of ours, full of divisions, crying out for healing,

this understanding of salvation, healing, changes much, I think, it thickens the passage.

The word World shows up over and over again in these passages.

In Greek, the word is Cosmos, we recognize that, don’t we?

It means the ordered system, the world, actually the universe, the whole creation.

The whole universe is being saved, healed, made whole,

not just human kind, but the whole creation.

How does that change our understanding of these passages?

I pray it thickens them! Makes them richer and all the more important.

Here’s another one, and again, this word you may have heard us talk about before:

The word that often is translated as **believe**, can perhaps better be understood as Trust.

It’s less about the heady belief in a doctrine, and more about embodied trust,

trust that we lean into, stake our lives on.

And one more word to notice, a bit later in the passage: Judgement.

That word actually comes from the word Crisis, like decision, choosing.

Augsburg University annually holds what is called the Fosdick Lecture in Preaching.

At the end of February, Barbara Lundblad was the speaker/preacher this year.

The title of her lecture was: "Shall the Christian Nationalists Win?"

This title picks up on a question from a pivotal sermon preached by Harry Emerson Fosdick in 1922

called "Shall the Fundamentalists Win? "

"Shall the Christian Nationalists Win?" Timely, isn't it?

I've listened to Barbara Lundblad's lecture which is now online and I commend it to you.

There is a lot there for this time, this election cycle, this "urgent time" as she stresses.

"For God so loved the world," Rev. Lundblad recited, and then she paused to thicken it,

Riffing "For God so loved the world."

"But doesn't God love America best?

What about American exceptionalism?

How could God love the world?

Does this include Palestine and Israel? Russia and Ukraine?

Does this include farmers and city folks? Gay and straight?"

Then she finishes her thought with a statement and a question:

"The world is important to God... Is it important also to us?"

Dear ones, Christianity can so easily be swept up into sound bites, and bumper stickers,

but the yearning is great and by grace, our faith can meet it.

I pray we can make space for the tangles, the thickening,

the rich and complicated stories of our ancestors,

and the brokenness and depth all around us.

And I give thanks for the truth of facing things straight on, looking up, finding healing,

and for the beautiful, courageous ways, by grace, we will meet this time.

For God loves you, God loves this world, God loves this whole creation, and God's healing is real.

Dear ones, by grace, immeasurable grace, we are called into this Love, into this life. Amen.