

Again and Again, God is Love
Numbers 21:4-9 | John 3: 14-21
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Today marks one year since we have been in pandemic quarantine. You might remember that I preached that very first virtual sermon - the staff all sitting together on the stage. We really had no idea what was coming. We weren't even wearing masks.

When we shut the doors and turned to virtual church, we wondered if we might be back in the building by Easter.

But we Eastered at home. We welcomed Pentecost at home. We worshipped throughout the summer and fall, at home. We learned to do committee meetings and Bible studies virtually. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany - we have spent our year worshipping together without ever coming together in the building. And here we are, back in the middle of Lent.

But perhaps you, like me, are allowing hope to sneak into your exhausted wandering. Perhaps the combination of warmer days, kinder rhetoric, vaccines, and the certain arrival of Spring has quickened something in your Spirit. Perhaps Easter will not be so incoherent this year.

I read an article this week that juxtaposes two ideas about being hopeful: Toxic Positivity and Tragic Optimism. In case you think they both sound a little dangerous, I confess that I had to actually read the article, more than just the headline, to make sense of it. And, simply put, at the most basic understanding - Toxic Positivity insists on choosing a positive spin at all costs - not only implying that grief or anxiety is unacceptable, but failing entirely to acknowledge hurt and brokenness. Tragic Optimism, on the other hand, fully takes hurt and brokenness into account, but looks for good, nevertheless.

During this season of Lent, and during this season of pandemic wilderness, this idea of Tragic Optimism seems like a helpful trail guide as we tiptoe, or careen, or whatever, toward a new season of life together as an Easter people. It's been bad. It's been hard. It still is. But I wonder what good things we will see emerge in our lives, and in our togetherness, and in our worship.

But here we are in this tenuous hopefulness that is still Lent and still winter, wondering when the Spring will catch hold.

It's not unusual for those describing the imminent arrival of spring to wax poetic about the birds and their chipper morning songs.

This is fine. I, too, appreciate the sounds of birds heralding the spring. But what I have learned this year is that there are birds who never left my yard all winter. I know this because they have spent many months attacking the window above my couch.

There is a tree there, one that ought to free them from the dangers of the yard. But they are insecure. Or ridiculous. They are, truly, angry birds. And when they see their own reflection they attack my window. Again and again.

They begin at dawn, disturbing my peaceful slumber. And they return throughout the day.

This sustained attack must be exhausting.

These angry birds came to mind when I was reading the scripture this week, particularly the Numbers passage. Those sojourners in the desert, going after Moses “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” It seems important to remember that this story is in Numbers. And the people have been in the desert since the middle of Genesis. So Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers...and were we to review these stories we would find that they have turned on Moses again and again. They are so insecure. Or ridiculous. Their mis-reading of the situation is not unlike birds aggressively attacking their own reflection.

It's Lent, and so we remember these desert stories. We remember that God brought the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt and that in the desert they were made free from all of those things that bound them. That they were made free to worship, and given the 10 Best Ways to live. And we remember that the stories of Jesus engage this tradition in conversation - and that this conversation is sometimes cryptic and requires all sorts of study and unpacking, - that it is sometimes symbolic - like the connection between the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert and the 40 years that the people Israel spent in the desert - and then sometimes we get something like today's texts: In the Numbers passage Moses holds up a bronze serpent in the wilderness, and then the John passage says “And just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness...”. They are begging to be understood together.

But what, exactly, can we understand from these passages?

We have before us this story about poisonous serpents seeming to exact revenge on those who spoke against God (and Moses) tethered to the passage that holds John 3:16. “For God so loved the world...”

If you have the energy, there is some grappling to do here.

I wish this bit about the poisonous serpents did not attribute them to God. So many dangerous and hurtful ideas about God start with this sort of claim. But the desert stories neither start nor end here. They start in the setting free of an enslaved people, and end with an approach to the Promised Land. This story takes place in the middle of prolonged wilderness, among a people who are grappling with their sense of place and belonging.

The anger and aggression that bubbles up here is, perhaps, kind of predictable for a people who are so ... untethered. So formed by the adversity of desert.

And when they are dying as a result of their anger, when they are tempted to turn away from God and return to the death of being bound, their life, their wholeness and healing, comes from realizing how much they needed God who loves them, who had brought them to that moment, who was always with them. Their wholeness and healing comes from saying - we have sinned. Please pray for us. Please help us. And Moses' response is not merely to pray for them, to offer words that absolve them, but to show them a reflection of the insidious slithering

serpents that were their poison - so that they might lift their eyes and - what? Live? They did not escape poison, but they survived it.

And so John asks us to understand Jesus in this way, not as one who causes us to escape poison, but as one who allows us to survive it. And by "poison," then, we might mean all sorts of ways of being separated from God, and from each other.

All sorts of slithering and insidious results of our failure to understand God's deep and abiding love for us. Our aggressive attacks on our own reflection. Of our experiments with loving darkness more than light.

In this John passage, we hear the promise that undergirds our life as children of God, formed in God's divine image: God is love.

Again and again. God is love.

Aggression and anger break the peace.

Again and again. God is love.

We fail to recognize the ways that God has made us free.

Again and again. God is love.

We threaten to love our hurt and brokenness more than we love God.

Again and again. God is love.

That is all there is. For God so love the world. For God SO loved the world, God sent Jesus, not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved. Might be loved. Might learn to love.

We play with this idea. We experiment with love. Sometimes we are even able to make love our refrain - something to which we return, again and again, verse after verse.

But God begins with Love. Before we act, or think or believe, before we exhaust ourselves with aggression, can Love be first for us too?

Family of God, you are beloved. Amen.