

#### 4 Lent B

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:14-21

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**Rev. Trish Schmermund**

Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton

March 11, 2018

Well this is a pretty famous and beloved passage from the Gospel of John. Who among us hasn't seen either seen a movie or someone on the street, perhaps at a sporting event, holding up a giant sign (or even a small one!) with the words "John 3:16?" "For God so loved the world..." Luther said it was the gospel in a nutshell. Even if someone doesn't go to church they are likely to know something of the Christmas story and John 3:16!

And indeed, it should be a famous and well-known passage. For God *does* love the world and God *did* send Jesus to make sure we understood this.

But this message of love for the world comes with a dark underbelly. John's gospel doesn't shy away from naming our need for such love. He's very honest about it, saying, "people loved darkness rather than light." The analogy of darkness and light is powerful and I think helpful for us to understand both God's love and humanity.

Jesus already knows who we are, what we are up to, but he invites us to be renewed anyway and to know that we are accepted, forgiven, redeemed. It reminds me of a story I heard long ago about an African community; whether it's true or not I don't know, but even so it makes a good point. When someone does a terrible thing, perhaps steals, or cheats, or even worse – instead of seeking retribution or a penalty or punishment the whole community surrounds the person, paying special attention to them. Over and over again, for as long as it takes, they say things like "you're a good man," "you're honorable," "you're generous," "you are a leader" whatever words that are counter to the unacceptable behavior. To tell them again and again and again the good things that we all have within. What kind of effect do you think that would have? In doing so, they stay close to the person to run interference to further behaviors and they hope to enable them to see, explore, grow their goodness within.

Growing our goodness starts with uncovering what is not good. That may seem counterintuitive – *why would I want to tell anyone about those things I'm not proud about?* But that kind of thinking would be like going to the doctor and not wanting her to see your infected wound. In uncovering it, exposing it, a doctor can then treat it.

Speaking of healing we can see the same theme in the first reading today. We heard that when a snake would bite them, the Israelites were to come and look at the snake that Moses put on a stick. (Ok, who here is thinking “that’s just weird, and I don’t get it?”)

Like the story from Africa, who knows whether this is literally true or not, but more importantly in this story we learn something. A snake bite was generally bad news (as the reading tells us many people died) and we also know the snakes bit people who were grumbling and complaining about God. The story teaches them to be honest about their grumbling and complaining. It teaches them that God already knows what’s in their heart and wants to be in relationship with them anyway. Just be honest about it. Be honest, come to God and... live. That’s because God wants a truthful, meaningful relationship with us, not one couched in platitudes.

Jesus said God did *not* send him to condemn the world, but to save it. It’s a revealing statement admitting that there are problems in the world. And many of those problems run systematically deep and to many of them we are completely blind. Like a fish living in water, we often can’t see the darkness we live within. Living this way hurts us. It is not life-giving, not healthy for individual, community or creation. What does this darkness look like?

Think back to slavery in the US. A terrible time of a systematic attitude that was poisonous to the whole of society. Yesterday I was reminded by one of our people of the 1980’s when AIDS was running through the community of our LGBTQ friends. People wouldn’t use the same utensils or touch someone for fear of infection.

More recently it looks like:

- a nation in turmoil, that juxtaposes the right to bear arms against the right to security and life. So ingrained is the fear of losing the ability to carry a gun, a large proportion of US citizens choose that fear instead of freedom.
- a nation in denial of racism, where we in Canada remain tied to treaties and reserves that continue to enable different class structures in accessing healthcare, education, employment, and housing.
- an industry of business and commerce, entertainment and sports, a socially accepted and long standing practice of power exercised over those who have not, now being exposed in the “Me Too” movement. Sexual harassment had become so commonplace, so accepted that it was never recognised or even named as “harassment” at all.

We love the systems we are part of, especially if we are ones to benefit from them. And that’s what Jesus meant when he said “people loved darkness rather than light.” The worst darkness is the kind that we have come to enjoy, the kind

that makes us feel powerful and privileged, the one that enables us to continue our way of life uninterrupted, even if it means that others suffer. The worst darkness is the one that we are unwilling to expose or even admit, because we don't really want to change. And those "worst darknesses" kill us as surely as we were bitten by a snake.

So, what to do. It's as simple as uncovering it, exposing the wound so that healing may begin. In practice it looks like:

- Listening. When we hear of things like gun violence, racism, Me Too, stop and listen. Just hear what is being said.
- Try not to be defensive. It's a natural reaction to feel defensive or to want to deny our part, but if we listen then we can begin to
- Learn. Read about it, Google it, talk to others of different perspectives, do some research. Ask yourself what God would say about it, try to open your mind and heart to understanding.
- Pray. Ask for forgiveness, understanding, for help to change, for justice.

The same practice may be put in place in our neighbourhood, churches and families. When new people move into your neighbourhood who are different, start by listening rather than judgment. When you struggle with changes and challenges you see at church, start by listening and learning rather than withdrawing. When a partner seems unreasonable and a relationship is uncomfortable, try again to open your heart and mind in understanding to the one you love.

And remember in it all God is here among us. Willing us to come and live, clearing a path for us to discard all that keeps us from life. Demonstrating that darkness has no power when exposed to light.

Amen.