

For God So Loves the World

Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14-21

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John 3:14-21 (The Message)

¹³⁻¹⁵"No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

¹⁶⁻¹⁸"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

¹⁹⁻²¹"This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is."



My family comes from New Hampshire. You know what the motto of New Hampshire is, don't you? "**Live free or die**". It was a saying by General John Stark, a Revolutionary War hero from New Hampshire. The full saying was: "Live free or die; death is not the worst of evils." Having lived in New Hampshire during a time when the political climate seemed especially parochial and limited in scope, I have had a jaundiced view of this state motto. It seemed to be long on pride and short on mercy. For instance, New Hampshire was the last state in the nation to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with a holiday.

I always felt the leaders in New Hampshire wanted to put a wall up at the border and keep the world out; that is, everyone except for the summer tourists who brought their business and the weekend shoppers who spent money in the region's only state without a sales tax. To sum it up, the motto of "Live Free or Die" made me often use a quote from a friend: New Hampshire is where granite is a state of mind.

But I've been thinking about freedom lately; and a couple of things have prompted me to think about it some more. One of those things is this passage from John. The other is a story shared with me by a member of our weekly Bible Study. We were discussing this familiar story from John's Gospel and somehow we got talking about heaven and salvation and eternal life. Then the conversation turned to what it means to be on a journey from slavery to freedom and that prompted a story by this former school teacher who said she used to read her classes the account of Harriet Tubman, a black woman who escaped slavery and went on to work in the Underground Railroad, becoming a "conductor," eventually making 19 trips back into slave territory and helping set free 300 slaves. She was a Moses traveling from slavery to freedom. And she was not above using strong methods to achieve her goals. Harriet Tubman would carry a gun with her and use it, not only for protection from slave catchers, but to "persuade" the slaves themselves who got scared and wanted to go back to their slave past. She would point the gun at them and say: "You'll live free or die."

*Oh, Freedom. Oh, Freedom. Oh, Freedom, over me.
And before I'd be a slave. I'll be buried in my grave.
And go home to my Lord and be free.*

Today's lessons are about freedom. To be sure, the story with Moses, God, the people and the snakes is a strange one. What kind of a God gets so upset with people complaining that this God sends poisonous snakes to kill them? Still, before we throw the story out completely, please notice something very human, even familiar, about the attitude of the Israelite people:

They said: "Why did you drag us out of Egypt to die in this godforsaken country? No decent food; no water—we can't stomach this stuff any longer."

I can just see Harriet Tubman yanking out her Colt 45, drawing a bead and saying: "**You'll live free or die.**"

We know the outcome of that Bible account. At the end of the Exodus story, the Israelites make it to the Promised Land. The covenant made by God, that God would deliver them, was fulfilled. It did, however, take a few snakes to keep the people in line.

In the John story we have the second half of a midnight conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The dialogue preceding today's lesson is about being born again. This is where Jesus says the Kingdom of God is only seeable if one is reborn, or "born from above." Nicodemus never really gets this message. But Jesus does not give up on him. In the portion of their conversation we have for today, Jesus is the only speaker. He tells Nicodemus what is perhaps the most memorized line of the Christian Scriptures:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

The Message, by Eugene Peterson, translates it this way:
This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.

Okay! Who wants a “whole and lasting life?” I do. And I believe you do as well. Now, of course, this discussion begs the question, “What is a whole and lasting life?” Good question. The answer is not obvious, however; nor is it without challenge. The answer to the question – what is a whole and lasting life, or what is eternal life, or what is abundant life – requires us to enter into a relationship, engage with God, and, ultimately, decide whether or not we want to be free.

This Christian journey upon which we find ourselves is really a whole lot easier and a whole lot harder than we can explain. It is easy because it is all about love. Like the song says:

*(Sung) Love, love, love, love; the gospel in one word is love.
Love your neighbor as yourself, for God loves us all.*

Nothing could be easier, right? Not necessarily. In order to love, we need to give up some ways of living and thinking that have become habitual and comfortable. We need to give up the idea that our well-being, our comfort, our safety is the most important thing on earth. We need to learn to see others, all others, as equally loved by God. We need to let go of our fear of death and our fear of living. We need to trust in God’s promise that God is with us, no matter what and no matter where, and accept the truth: we will not be forsaken or abandoned.

This is the hard part about being Christian, about taking Jesus seriously. We like the idea of being loved, but we do not like the idea of how that love might mean we have change. Or maybe we think that we can get by on our own, and ask of God, what have you done for me lately? Or maybe we think, like Groucho Marx: "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member." Maybe we think God can't love a person like me, and if God does, then God is fooled by my façade and doesn't deserve my trust.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, ***The Last Battle***, from his Narnia Chronicles, does a nice job dramatizing the difficulty or the challenge of Christian freedom. In this story, the dwarfs have been fooled by a pretender and are distrustful when the real Aslan – the Christ figure in the book – shows up. Aslan invites them to enter into his love, his abundant life, but they are proud and they will not give up their

pride. In explanation, Aslan says to his followers: "They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out." (p. 139)

The Christian message is very simple. God loves the world. We can accept it or not. If we accept it, then we are confronted with the challenge to be part of that love. We cannot get caught up in distractions, like, God loves only part of the world, or God loves the world up to a point and no further. The depth of God's love is greater than we can imagine. It reaches deep into our fear and meets us there. It will not let us go, unless we let go.

I would like to close with a paragraph from a sermon by Paul Tillich, because it helps me stay on the Freedom Trail:

"Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*" If that happens to us, we experience grace." (from *The Shaking of the Foundations* by Paul Tillich, Chapter 19).

Thanks be to God.

Amen.