

Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? [OR What Are You Looking At?]

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

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on March 14, 2021

“Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see?” “I see a red bird looking at me.”

“Red Bird, Red Bird, what do you see?” “I see a yellow duck looking at me.”¹

So goes the children’s book that I read infinity times to my children when they were little. It popped into my head as I was thinking about what the Israelites saw in the Bible story from the book of Numbers this morning.

Israelite, Israelite, what do you see? I see a poisonous serpent looking at me.

Poisonous Serpent, Poisonous Serpent, what do you see? I see a Moses man looking at me.

Moses Man, Moses Man, what do you see? I see a bronze serpent looking at me.

Bronze Serpent, Bronze Serpent, what do you see? I see scared Israelites looking at me.

One of the odder and more disturbing stories in the Bible, the Israelites whine and complain against Moses and God after being freed from slavery in Egypt. Their misery about the conditions in the wilderness brings out their smallest selves – impatient and afraid, they question their liberation and they question God and Moses. Things go quickly from bad to worse with the arrival of the poisonous serpents. The Israelites confess their sin and are freed from death by looking at the bronze serpent on a stick. They look at the very thing that causes pain, making it visible to be able to see life itself.² Fighting their fear, the Israelites are saved by focusing on source of their injury. That’s the solution lifted up by God and Moses.

Scared Israelite, Scared Israelite, what do you see? I see a bronze serpent looking at me.

How many times have we heard the opposite? Someone giving advice to not look at the very thing that is scary, painful, or dangerous because it’s too upsetting. Look on the sunny side of life, they say. There’s truth enough in that encouragement. We can’t indulge in the dark, wrapping our smallest selves around fear and pain, if we have any chance at a balanced life. Joy and hope are lost to us if that’s the plan. Taking time to directly assess the cause of our pain may be necessary time in the dark, finding a glimmer of hope flickering in the darkness.

Hope flickering in the darkness brings us to the Gospel of John reading. We are not given all the verses in the story. The verses we hear today are part of a longer speech by Jesus to

¹ Bill Martin Jr. (author) and Eric Carle (illustrator). *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1967). Listen to the whole book here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTr0eDESN7U>

² Kari Reiquam, Interim Pastor, Holy Love Lutheran Church, Aurora, CO. Preacher’s Text Study for Metro East Conference of Rocky Mountain Synod, ELCA. March 9, 2021.

Nicodemus, a Jewish Pharisee, a religious leader. Nicodemus visits Jesus “by night,” under the cover of darkness. We’re not told exactly why he visits Jesus in the dark of night, but the Gospel of John makes a big deal out of light and dark. The opening verses of the book tell us, “The lights shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”³ Later in John, Jesus will say, “I am the light of the world.”⁴ Nicodemus, in the dark of night, said to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God.”

Nicodemus, Nicodemus, what do you see? I see Rabbi Jesus looking at me.

Rabbi Jesus, Rabbi Jesus, what do you see? I see Nic-at-night looking at me.

Jesus does not disappoint. He teaches his heart out. The verses we hear today are the second half of his teaching to Nicodemus and contain one of the most well-known parts of the Bible beginning with, “For God so loved the world...” It’s obvious why the people putting together the three-year cycle of worship readings paired this passage with the Old Testament reading about Moses and the Israelites. Jesus compared himself being lifted up on the cross with the bronze serpent lifted up on a stick by Moses. And then Jesus talked about God so loving the world, sending the Son not for condemnation but “in order that the world might be saved through him.” The Greek word for “saved” here, *sozo* [σώζω / sodezo], can mean to protect someone from danger or to heal and restore.⁵

Beloved World, Beloved World, what do you see? I see Jesus the Light looking at me.

Jesus the Light, lifted up on a cross, shines light in the darkness of man’s inhumanity to man, or Son of Man as the case may be. To look at the cross is to look at the damage we can do in our worst moments when we believe that grace doesn’t belong to anyone else. We look at the darkness within us, and know that by looking at it, by examining the darkness, healing becomes a possibility. We depend on the daily promise of our baptisms for the freedom to live each day by grace through faith. We trust that God loving the world means that God also loves each one of us which means that there is nothing we can do or not do to make God love us any more or any less; that we are children of God.

Child of God, Child of God, what do you see? I see the God of grace looking at me.

Grace is what frees us to look at the causes of our pain and the pain we cause acting out of it. We don’t hurt ourselves or other people from our healed, larger selves. It’s from our smaller selves, wrapped around our pain, cozied up with our fear, that we inflict ourselves on each other. Healing can be a life-long process. As opposed to a self-help project, healing

³ John 1:5

⁴ John 8:12

⁵ Bible Study Tools: Lexicon. “Sozo.” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/sozo.html>

takes community, sometimes including professionals trained to help us work through specific trauma. Jesus shares the space with us when we end up confused in the dark. We call this the Theology of the Cross. Jesus suffers with us when we suffer, shining light on the broken places in need of healing. God's grace, showing up in the person of Jesus, was so excessive and offensive that the people in power reacted by doing their worst and killing him. Untamed grace is simply that threatening. Untamed grace shines light in the darkness and pulls life out death. Who knows what then becomes possible?!

God of Grace, God of Grace, what do you see? I see the world I so love looking at me.