

Strange Gifts – Ben Wayman

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

When I was six years old Santa Claus visited my house. It was a good year for Santa to come. While my three-year-old brother was obsessed with monkeys, for 11 months I had been locked in on a remote control car with 9.6v turbo, which I would take over a Red Ryder bb gun any day. My brother sat on Santa's lap, who then asked my brother what he would like for Christmas and he responded immediately: a monkey. Sure enough, out of his bag of goodies Santa pulled a monkey. I couldn't believe it. This guy may in fact be the real thing. The monkey was stuffed, but it was close enough. Then it was my turn. When Santa asked what I wanted, I confidently responded: a remote control car with 9.6v turbo. He reached into his bag and handed me . . . an ornate porcelain doll. That was when I stopped believing in Santa.

This morning I want to suggest that Lent is all about learning how to receive strange gifts. Lent trains us to receive God in ways that stretch the limits of our imaginations. Our lessons today help us see that we are, by nature, resistant to the kinds of gifts God gives. And this resistance is at the heart of our rebellion against God.

Our scripture from Numbers drops us right in the middle of the desert with the Israelites. They have just left Mount Hor, the mountain on which Aaron was left to die, and they are now headed by the way to the Red Sea. They have to go around the land of Edom because the king there has forbidden travel on the main road, which runs right through his territory. The land promised to Abraham, which is the goal of this journey, still seems impossibly far away. They are stuck between their rescue from Egypt and their rest in the Promised Land.

And so the people become impatient. And it's not the first time. Throughout the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness several complaint stories are recorded, and they all have a similar pattern. First, there's (1) complaint over hardship in the desert, coupled with (2) nostalgia for the good ol' days in Egypt, followed by (3) punishment from God, then (4) repentance by the people and 5) intercession by Moses. Finally, 6) God resolves the situation.

Our story from Numbers today is the last and most serious complaint story, because in this account, the people speak against Moses *and* God. But the pattern is familiar. They complain that bondage in Egypt is preferable to life with God in the wilderness. So God dispatches poisonous snakes that bite and kill many Israelites. The people repent. Moses intercedes. And God resolves the situation. One bit of the pattern that I failed to mention is that God's resolutions are often as strange as the punishments: like quails coming out of the Israelites' noses, or sprouting staffs, or rocks bursting with water. Today we get a bronze serpent on a staff that heals anyone who looks at it. Nothing more and nothing less—by simply looking at the serpent on the staff, the poisoned Israelites are healed. These resolutions to the Israelites' rebellion are strange and require a conversion of our imaginations.

According to John's Gospel, such a conversion requires that we be reborn. The context for our beloved John 3:16 is Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and he's come to see Jesus at night, which means he still doesn't know what to think of Jesus. And sure enough, Jesus messes up Nicodemus' understanding of God's action in the world; he has told him that he must be born again in order to see the kingdom of God. John's Gospel is all about learning how to see the kingdom of God, because if we can't see it, we can't receive it. The kingdom of God, according to Jesus, looks like the Son of Man lifted up high on a cross. Jesus teaches us that the way we learn to see God's strange actions as obvious is through baptism—by being born of water and spirit—because baptism brings us into God's world.

So here we have three strange gifts: a bronze serpent on a staff, the Son of Man lifted up, and baptism. All are gifts from God and all have the power to heal.

Our passage today relays the tail end of Jesus' response to Nicodemus, where we learn that baptism not only heals our sight, but also connects us with God's saving action on the cross. John Chrysostom, the premier preacher of the fourth century, explains the connection this way: *Having made mention of the gift of baptism, [Jesus] proceeds to the source of it, that is, the cross. . . . These two things, more than anything else, declare [God's] unspeakable love: that he both suffered for his enemies and, having died for his enemies, he freely gave them by baptism the entire forgiveness of all of their sins.*" (John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John 27.1; quoted in ACCS NT IVa, p.123)

What Chrysostom shows us is that baptism unites us with the God who suffers for his *enemies*, dies for them, and then offers them full forgiveness and reconciliation. So when Jesus likens Moses' lifting up the serpent in the wilderness to his being lifted up on the cross, he offers us new eyes for seeing what the kingdom of God is all about. And here's what we find: It is all gift.

The kingdom of God is not about running marathons in the wilderness or Torah observance. It's not about our achievements or purity or flawless morality. And it's not about Lenten heroism or self-justification. It's all gift.

This is strange to Nicodemus, and it's strange to us. One reason why this seems unimaginable is because we have been thoroughly shaped by American social culture, which is all about reciprocity. "Thanks for buying my meal today; I'll pick up yours tomorrow." We have all been taught there are no free lunches. We are trained to think that every gift has strings attached and really, we prefer it that way. Such reciprocity preserves the illusion of independence, accomplishment, and desert that we all cherish because reciprocity is safe, and it's predictable, and it has limits.

This isn't only an American thing; it appears it's an Israelite thing as well, which suggests to me that it's probably just a human thing. The rebellion of the Israelites is probably best understood as their rejection of God's gifts. We get a sense of this in the statement that they *detest this miserable food* (Numbers 21:5), by which they mean God's manna. A better translation is they *detest this empty (or hollow) bread*. The Israelites

have been eating the bread of angels; they have experienced God's presence with them in the wilderness as God's cloud stood over them and went before them as a *pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night* (Numbers 14:14). But they long for the days when they labored under the iron fist of the Egyptians and earned their food. Their arrangement in Egypt at least gave them a semblance that they controlled their destiny, not God. They preferred the predictability of slavery to the surprise of freedom, which is life with God.

And here's the punch in the gut: so do we. God's gifts are strange and we too easily grow tired of them, and often, we refuse them.

The heart of the problem with a true gift, the kind without strings attached, is that when we actually encounter such a gift, it scares us to death. True gifts come from a different economy than the one we know, one that belongs to a kingdom that is not of this world. A true gift is dangerous and unpredictable, surprising and limitless. And this is how God loves us: with reckless abandon and no strings attached.

Time and again, God pours himself out to us, just as he did with Israel in the wilderness and just as he did on the cross. This is how God rolls. He loves the world—not just the church and not just those people who reciprocate. He loves the people that don't pay him back what they owe; he loves the people who betray him even though they promised never to deny him; and he loves the people who nailed him to the tree. God's love is all gift. And it's terrifying.

The scandal of John 3:16 is that God loves the whole world without limit, and desires its full salvation; but we prefer reciprocity and bondage. We prefer the darkness on our terms rather than the light of God's kingdom. We have been trained to think that salvation is something that we either deserve or we don't, and we cannot possibly imagine that it really is all gift.

Today—in the middle of Lent—we are the Israelites caught between Egypt and Promised Land and we are Nicodemus stuck between darkness and light. But here's the good news: God has lifted up his Son high enough for all of us to see his immeasurable love for us. And it's crazy strange. And it's total gift. The author of Ephesians puts it this way: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...For we are what **he** has made us.* (Ephesians 2:8, 10; emphasis added)

God's desire for us this Lent is not only that we learn to receive the strange gifts God gives us in plenty, but that such gifts remake us into the strange and godly people we were created to be.