

March 11, Lent 4B (Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21)

Don't forget to read John 3:17.

by [Mihee Kim-Kort](#) in the [February 14, 2018](#) issue

Inspired by the play-based curriculum of their nursery school, I used to turn my kitchen over to my children. This was when they were barely toddling around, when they were just gurgling a few words at a time. I would get out all the pots and pans, every possible cooking utensil and other paraphernalia, and large bowls of whatever ingredients: rice, flour, baking soda, various shapes of dried noodles, water, vinegar, food coloring. We would go at it, straining and combining, kneading and splashing.

If there was ever an image for the strange mixing of metaphors that sometimes happens in these Gospel texts, this would be it.

As we continue with Lent, Jesus continues his conversation with Nicodemus. “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,” Jesus says, in the very beginning of this week’s assigned text. I always do a bit of a double take when I read this. I try to wrap my mind around the comparison of Jesus to the snakes sent to bite the Israelites in Numbers after they complain to God about the lack of food and water on their seemingly endless journey through the land of Canaan. The image of the serpent always triggers images of other serpents throughout the Bible—the Eden account, Moses’ shepherd’s crook, and Jesus’ advice to his disciples to be as “wise as serpents,” to name a few examples. All these representations of serpents swirl around in my mind as I read the rest of John’s familiar words about God’s love for the world, as words like *belief*, *eternal life*, *light*, and *judgment* seem to sizzle on the surface.

In this passage, the serpent reminds us not only of another time when people were needy and perishing, but of a time when they were saved simply by looking up. So we are to understand Jesus in the same way, as an offering by a God who “so loved the world,” and one who would later ascend to heaven to sit at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. And yet, the rest of the story is not so simple: it’s about Jesus’ humiliation and crucifixion. It’s not just about his exaltation. There is darkness

and light, judgment and salvation, death and life, doubt and belief, but these are not straightforward distinctions. We don't always reside in one or the other. Even Nicodemus, a man of wealth, privilege, and education, apparently needed to hear this wonderfully bizarre message of God's love.

It is this ambiguous posture that orients me to the rest of the passage, particularly John 3:16, a verse often used today as a cosmic, moral ruler to mark out who is truly a believer and, therefore, a recipient of eternal life. But John 3:16 shouldn't be read in isolation, as a black-and-white statement. The next verse contains the reminder that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." It is fitting then that shortly after this utterance Jesus sends his disciples into that world to encounter someone on the opposite end of the spectrum from Nicodemus—that is, the Samaritan woman. The two conversations around water and life have close parallels, an indication that this message of salvation is truly for the world.

Salvation involves the strange mixing of crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

Though my children are a little older now, they still play the same games with me in the kitchen. But sometimes, as I cook an actual meal, one will pull up a stool to "help" and watch me, to witness the magic of ingredients coming together to become something real and life-giving. They know now that when we play in the kitchen, and I pull out the ingredients for us to pretend to cook, that it's not real. They don't believe that it will become spaghetti and meatballs or a cake, and yet these moments hint at something more. When we play it doesn't diminish the possibility of joy, of being filled up, and of feeling and being alive.

I see another mixing, one of embodied realities and encounters. We read these words about light and darkness in the midst of the long shadows of Lent, and I wonder what it means to let these words trouble our perception of light. On the other hand, I wonder what it means to let our time residing in the twilight of this season impact the words of God's salvation, God's strange and outrageous love. Sometimes salvation comes to us in unexpected ways. It might look like what is killing us. It might be what takes down the structures and systems that categorically separate the Nicodemuses and the Samaritan women of the world. It might be the strange mixing of crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. It might be reimagining what it means to be born again or thirsty for living waters.

Whether we are playing make-believe or we somehow truly believe, what is miraculous is that God's love is real, God's love is true, and God's love is for the whole world.