

The Price of Love

Num 21:4-9; John 3:14-17

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Numbers 21: 4-9:

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 3:14-17: (taken from First Nations Version, an Indigenous Translation)

Do you not remember when Drawn from the Water (Moses) lifted up a pole with a snake on it in the desert wilderness? This is what will happen to the True Human Being, so people will put their trust in him and have the life of the world to come that never fades away, full of beauty and harmony. The Great Spirit loves this world of human beings so deeply God gave us the Son—the only Son who fully represents God. All who trust in him and his way will not come to a bad end, but will have the life of the world to come that never fades away, full of beauty and harmony. Creator did not send the Son to decide against the people of this world, but to set them free from the worthless ways of the world.

Surviving in the desert is tough! It leaves you thirsty and you can't survive without water—heat or no heat—for more than three days. Ask migrants crossing through deserts to the US Border, or desperately thirsty children in Sudan or in Gaza caught in the violent wastelands of fighting.¹ For many humans, lack of access to food and water is truly a matter of life and death. We collectively often fail miserably at providing it because of nationalist ambitions, othering, and self-interest. We humans also thirst and hunger for so much more as well, for safety, meaningful freedom, connection, and love. In our story from Numbers, we find God and Moses trying so very hard to lead people to freedom out of slavery in Egypt. God has provided Manna to feed them and will also find ways to get water to flow from rocks

¹ Water and food are essential for survival and every human and non-human being should have access to it. Too often, it is the lack of human will, not God's, to provide it safely and equitably.

(Numbers 20:8). Still, times are harder than people expected, and they are stuck in disorientation and fear of further hardship.

What can their struggle and stuckness teach us about learning to trust God's intention to quench our deepest thirst for belonging and love? The people in our story revert to complaining, projecting, and assuming that the grass is somehow greener somewhere else. I don't mean to make light of this but notice how even nostalgia for their old life in captivity becomes tempting. This is only human. God sends the strong medicine of serpents in response which can be agents of destruction and healing. Perhaps we can think of it as naming the necessity to die to our fears, to shed an old skin, so we can move forward again in trust. The bronze serpent on a pole provides the antidote to death² and stands for God's intention to heal and liberate. Those who trust this intention live.

The author of John's Gospel draws on the image of the serpent on the pole and elevates Jesus on the cross as the new and most powerful antidote to a world living in hardship, denial, and pain.³ For John, God is now doing healing work through Jesus: his life, death on the cross, and his resurrection to newness of life. For John, this death, however we may interpret it in detail, is a witness to God's ultimate love. The Greek word usually translated as "world" here is *cosmos*! God loves not one tribe over another but everything and everyone!⁴ It is God's love for the whole *cosmos* symbolized in the cross which anchors us amidst the constant currents of change, of living, dying, and rising again - our central themes of Lent and Easter.

I would like to tell you an ancient Inuit tale about Skeleton Woman and the Fisherman from Clarissa Pinkola-Estés book *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (ch. 5). The story speaks to the

² The pole is akin to the one on the staff of Asclepius, the Greek God of healing.

³ We find this passage only in John.

⁴ Jesus' death is not an act of appeasing an angry God but of the price God pays for compassionate love. This love undermines and baits the greedy and oppressive principalities and powers of the world who choke on it.⁴ All who believe in this gift of God's self-giving love, no matter who they are or how they have lived, can find greater intimacy with God and greater freedom to resist supporting what is untrue and destructive. This freedom in turn empowers service and risk-taking. However, our lives are also turned upside down in the process as we let old beliefs and negative patterns die and rise to a new identity as children of God.

invitation to embrace living, dying, and rising again in our own lives and in our relationships. It is also a story of learning the hard way that to love has a lot to do with staying put when every cell in our bodies wants to say: "Run."⁵ As you listen, please keep in mind that ancient myths speak to the God given female and male energies in all of us. Now to the story:

She had done something of which her father disapproved, although no one could remember what it actually was. He had dragged her to the cliffs and thrown her into the ocean to die. The fish and sea creatures reduced her body to bones, and she became Skeleton Woman. She resided at the bottom of this bay which local fisherman believed to be haunted. But, one day, an unknowing fisherman steered his kayak into the bay to fish. The hook of his fishing rod drifted down deep and, of all things, caught the bones of Skeleton Woman. He could feel the tug and got very excited. "Surely, I have caught a really big fish this time! This is wonderful!" He began to imagine how many people he could feed and how long he could rest before having to hunt again.

As he wrestled with the great weight on his hook, the sea was stirred up and his kayak began to tip and shake. The more Skeleton Woman struggled to free herself from the line, the more entangled she became. Gradually, he was pulling her up. He turned to get his net and did not notice her bald head breaching the surface and the barnacles in the orbits of her eye sockets. By the time he turned toward her, her body was hanging off the edge of his kayak by her long front teeth. "Agh!" he cried out in horror and fell to his knees. He finally mustered the courage to knock Skeleton Woman off the kayak and began to paddle away like a madman. He did not realize that she was still tangled in his line and the harder he paddled, the higher she rose out of the waters until her whole body seemed to be running along the water's surface behind him.

As soon as his kayak hit land, he jumped out, grabbed his fishing rod, and began to run. Sure enough, he was dragging her right along. He ran right through someone's stands of drying fish

⁵ Dr. Clarissa Pinkola-Estés, *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*, (Balantine Books, NY, 1995 Edition, 150).

while she grabbed a few of them and began to feed herself even while this wild “chase” was unfolding. When the fisherman reached his Igloo, his heart was beating like a loud drum. He crawled inside his dark and protective shelter on his hands and knees and thought he was safe. The fisherman recited prayers of thanks. Imagine how he felt when he lit his lamp and found Skeleton Woman in a heap on the floor of his own snow house. She was so entangled that one knee was caught in her rib cage and a heel was draped over her shoulder!

At first, the man was horrified. He wasn't sure what moved him so, whether the soft light was softening his heart or if he had just been lonely for so long. To his own surprise, a feeling of compassion slowly came over him. He reached out with his dirty hands and spoke to her gently while trying to untangle her from the fishing line. He even began to sing a song to her, “Oh, nan, na, na. Oh, nan, na, na,” while he sorted out her limbs. Then he wrapped one of his best furs around her and made a fire to warm her. He gazed at her until he fell asleep.

He fell into a dream and a tear began to run down his cheek. Skeleton Woman, who had remained quiet and cautious, noticed the tear and inched closer to him until she could drink from it. Amazingly, the tear kept flowing until she had had her fill. She felt revived and came even closer to him. She proceeded to take his heart out of his chest and patted it. While she heard the heart's song of: “Bom, bomm. Bom, bomm,” she kept saying “flesh, flesh, flesh” and slowly became embodied again, a full figure, a woman in bloom. And then she crept under the covers with the fisherman and returned his heart to him as hers was now beating on its own. The two awoke all entangled and became a couple, in a lasting and good way. And it has been said that the creatures of the sea from which she had come fed them well, year after year.

What do we make of this story? Pinkola-Estés⁶ works with this story as a tale of teaching one soul to love another which I also find relevant for our spiritual communal lives and the texts for

⁶ I encourage you to read her book for a more detailed reading of this story. I can only highlight a few aspects.

today. An integral part of this journey into deeper love is to embrace the cycles of our own transformation as, over time, there are many endings and new beginnings, as parts of our identity and story have to die so new ones can arise.

Through our experience of love - of God, others, and ourselves, we begin to discover a treasure though we may not know its full identity. Like the Israelites, we may project our hopes to find eternal bliss and freedom from struggle. Like the fisherman, we may imagine that we will be fed for the foreseeable future now that we have landed this great catch. When we come face to face with the fact that “what we have caught” is more complex than we thought, we may be tempted to throw our “catch” back into the sea. This is reminiscent of the wandering Israelites from our story.⁷ Like the fisherman, we may just start to run and hide – looking for the safety of our familiar home.

Skeleton Woman may well represent the feminine intuition, creativity, and embrace of cycles of living, birthing, dying, and living in our own bodies that has been suppressed in us by our patriarchal culture.⁸ In her restored form, she represents the knowing that not all is bliss and that we need to learn when to allow for “the old” to pass away and make room for “the new.” All lasting relationships need to embrace such patterns to thrive. As mentioned above, Estés writes, “To love means to stay when every cell says: ‘Run!’ (p. 150) rather than hide in our hut or believe there is someone better waiting for us elsewhere.

While there are relationships that are not safe to abide in, most relationships can survive and even thrive when we become more willing to touch the not so beautiful in others and in ourselves and dare to untangle together (p.155). It takes the willingness to let our hearts be softened and become curious and compassionate about the unruly tangle of our own and another’s story, triggers, fears, confusions and hopes that can throw us out of alignment or

⁷ I am also reminded of a passage in Luke in which people wanted to throw Jesus off the cliff when they realized how challenging his witness and invitation really was (Luke 14:16-40).

⁸ Estés writes, “... she represents the inner authority that knows the steps, knows the dance of Life and Death. It is composed of aspects of ourselves who know when something can, should, and must be born and when it must die “ (p.144).

starve our hearts. We may have to develop spiritual practices to help us do this work task of untangling and understanding old hurts and wounds, again and again. Like the fisherman, we may have to find a song of the heart or its equivalent to do this work of love. Grace, good will, a new measure of trust, and even new dreams can emerge allowing us to relax again rather than hide in fear or try to throw rejected parts off the cliff. If we do not face this challenge, there is no chance for transformation.

The fisherman eventually faces this challenge and represents the mature masculine in us who is unafraid of his own emotions, can stand up and risk love and compassion for his own healing and that of others (p.162). He can now dare to dream and shed tears which embrace wounds and possibility and, in turn, become nourishment for Skeleton Woman on her way to becoming more fully embodied again.⁹ They even share a heart for a while, trusting that, “while one side of the heart empties, another fills (p.142),” modeling the flow of emptying and filling, dying and rising of all life.

As Christians, we find these patterns of living, dying, and rising through Lent and Easter (and beyond) modeled in Jesus Christ. Our God loves us so much that we are being constantly renewed, undone, and renewed again in the very context of our lived lives and relationships. In Christ, God is not afraid to untangle our messes, sing to our wounds, shed a tear for us, and dream with us. The Holy Spirit comes alive in us as we trust God’s presence within and among us. She empowers us to trust our hearts and risk ourselves for love – love for each other, love for our tangled embodied lives, and love for our God who will not let us go. God is always willing to pay the price of love! May the Holy Spirit empower us to do the same.

⁹ Pinkola-Estés calls him an *inocente* which in Spanish means a person who tries not to harm another, but who also is able to heal any injury or harm to herself (p. 160).”