

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
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John 3:14-21

“Deep Calls to Deep”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

The much loved and highly respected *New York Times* has been called “the gray lady” because its coverage is so deep and dense. A venerable publication, *The Times* is a newspaper for people who like news and like to read. And yet in March 2008—to the surprise of many—the editors at the *Times* announced that they would, from then on, devote pages 2 and 3 in every issue not to some late-breaking news story, but to summaries of articles that appeared elsewhere in the newspaper. The editors said that this change at *The Times* would allow readers to turn directly to pages 2 and 3 to get capsule summaries of longer articles found deep in the pages of “the gray lady.”

The *New York Times* is not alone. Last year, our local paper, *The Daily Hampshire Gazette* also instituted the practice of putting summaries and short articles on page 3 under the headline “Briefings.” There the reader finds abbreviated articles about news in the Commonwealth under the heading “State Briefs” and one-sentence summaries of the day’s “Selected Stories” and “Editorials.”

According to Nicholas Carr writing in *The Atlantic*, changes like these found in *The New York Times* and in the *Gazette* are part of a larger trend worldwide. Carr says that people are reading less and when they read, people are reading less deeply. Carr, who studies technology, business and culture, believes that it is the use of the Internet that is changing our reading habits. Furthermore, Carr says Internet use is actually rewiring our brains—he believes Internet use is changing the very circuits in our brains that have to do with cognition. It’s true, Carr writes, the Internet supplies users with accurate and valuable information quickly and easily BUT, along the way, Internet use is reshaping the way we think.

Carr is right. Research studies show that when people view material online, they skim rather than read deeply. When using the Internet, people tend to hop rapidly from one source to another. Internet users also tend to read one or two pages of an

article online and then leap to another link or site. Researchers have found that Internet users are not actually reading in the traditional sense—a new form of reading has emerged called “power browsing.”

Maryanne Wolf, a psychologist at Tufts University, believes that this new kind of reading—power browsing—promotes efficiency and immediacy but may be “withering away our capacity for the kind of deep reading books call for.” Wolf says we are becoming “mere decoders of information,” and are losing our ability to make “the rich mental connections that form when we read deeply.”

According to Nicholas Carr, deep, slow reading that a sequence of printed pages promotes is valuable not just for the knowledge we acquire from the words but for the intellectual vibrations those words trigger within our minds. In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book, we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, cultivate our own ideas. According to Maryanne Wolf, “deep reading is indistinguishable from deep thinking.”

This awareness of the decline in deep reading brings us to the passage for today in the Gospel of John. While not every verse in today’s passage (John 3:14-21) may be on the tip of your tongues, many of you know John 3:16 by heart:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Martin Luther called this (and the verse that follows) “the Gospel in miniature” and other theologians have called this passage “the Gospel in a nutshell”—although one smart aleck has said that the only thing you find in a nutshell is a nut.

If we read the today’s passage from John in the hop-skip, power browsing fashion that has become common today...if we land for just a moment on the one verse (John 3:16) that we know so well, we will be skimming through the Bible the way researchers have found we skim through material online.

So let us pause and recognize that deep reading of newspapers, articles and books is declining and admit that deep reading of the Bible may be as well. Maybe this Lent and on into the future, this Church can be counter cultural (we’re good at that!) and reclaim deep, thoughtful reading of the Bible. Maybe we can commit to slowing down, reading deeply and finding new meaning in these old words.

Maybe we can reclaim that ancient tradition well practiced and well loved millennia ago of deep, slow reading of Scripture alone in silence, AND deep, slow reading of Scripture aloud together. Maybe we can let the words wash over us, let our minds linger on each line, let our senses notice which words or verses shimmer for us.

During Lent this year, our Thursday Morning Prayer Circle has asked Sue Carbin to read aloud to us the Passion narrative in the Book of Mark. Sue pauses after each verse and we absorb each line deeply. This past Thursday, when Sue finished reading and we fell into silent prayer, I could feel us holding the passage with loving care, I could feel us rolling the words over in our hearts and minds. When Lynn Fogg spoke she lifted a question that she was pondering based on the reading—her reflection then inspired other thoughts, questions and prayers based on the Scripture Sue had read aloud.

Today when you heard the reading from the Book of John, you might have been tempted to dismiss it quickly. Oh, I know that passage....yeah, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....yeah yeah, ho hum. So what else is new? But let's slow down and not write off this passage as well known and not in need of reflection. Let's pause and think deeply about what is being said in these verses.

Today's passage, John 3:14-21, begins with a strange reference...did you catch it? Listen again to the first line...John 3:14

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

That's the first line of the passage for today. And that's Jesus speaking. We could just skim over that confusing reference to serpents in the wilderness or we could ask: what is Jesus talking about?

To figure out what Jesus is saying, we have to go back—back to the beginning of Chapter 3. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, visits Jesus by night. He is confused, self-conscious, coming to Jesus under cover of darkness and asking Jesus questions to determine: who is this guy and should I listen to him, believe in him, follow him, worship him? Our passage today is part of the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. In fact, our reading for today picks up their dialogue mid-conversation.

Because Jesus and Nicodemus are both Jewish and steeped in knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus is able to talk to Nicodemus in short-hand, referring to the serpent story knowing that Nicodemus will understand the reference and be able to use it as a comparison to Jesus' mission.

However, the serpent story that Jesus refers to, that Nicodemus undoubtedly understands, may not spring to YOUR minds! So now we are in need of some deep reading. The serpent story requires some investigation, it requires that we go back into the Hebrew Scriptures to find the root of this reference. The story comes from the Book of Numbers 21:4-9. The story in Numbers finds the people of Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan, after the exodus. Their route requires them to skirt the land of Edom. Apparently, this detour makes the Israelites whiney and they start on the litany of complaints they have raised to Moses before: "Our slavery in Egypt was better than this. We're going to die out here in the wilderness." They rant about the miserable food and the lack of water. They complain not only about Moses but also about God.

Well, this is not the first time the Israelites have complained, nor is it the second or third. This is about the fourth time the Israelites have raised their voices in displeasure. The other times, God addressed their complaints. But this time, God sent poisonous serpents among them, and people were bitten and died. Those who lived admitted they had sinned against God and pleaded with Moses to intervene with God on their behalf. When Moses did, God told Moses to fashion a serpent out of bronze and place it on a pole. God said that anyone who was bitten by a snake should look at the bronze serpent on the pole, and they would recover and live.

A deep reading of today's passage, now going back and including the opening verses at the beginning of John Chapter 3 and going back to find Numbers 21 reveals that Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus in short hand because, as Jews, they know these stories well. When Jesus says to Nicodemus, *And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life* Nicodemus suddenly understands that Jesus intends to be a savior to humanity.

Jesus is revealing to Nicodemus who he is and his purpose on earth to be a savior to the faithful. Jesus is saying that just as looking at the bronze serpent on a pole enabled the Israelites who were dying due to their sin to live, so looking at Jesus with belief enables those dying in sin today to live eternally.

The passage then continues with Jesus and Nicodemus carrying on their dialogue. Jesus says to Nicodemus *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. John 3:16-17*

A deep reading of this passage reveals that John 3:16 (that well known, little considered verse) is the impetus for the formation of a radically inclusive community to which all are welcome—the lost, the marginalized, the forgotten, the abandoned—bringing healing and new life as God, “who so loves the world,” did through Jesus.

In John 3:17, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he did not come to be like the biting serpents of judgment and death, he was not sent to condemn the world but to save it. Jesus is not separating God’s people into the saved and the unsaved—a hierarchy based on some kind of religious superiority—Jesus’ message instead is one of inclusion and hope. God sent an incarnate being not to denounce and condemn, not to divide and conquer, but to love and heal that others might experience the kingdom of God. That is what Jesus is saying.

And the conversation with Nicodemus continues....and Jesus goes on to name the painful truth that he is a light who has come to a people who love darkness.

Listen:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light...John 3:19

Jesus is unafraid to name the sad tendency of his beloved brothers and sisters to love the darkness....he names the truth that he came preaching a radically inclusive love, a message of generosity and compassion, and a commitment to reach those on the margins of power and status. And yet even with a light of his strength, power and radiance coming to the world, people shunned him, reviled him, harassed him, doubted him, betrayed him and murdered him. Jesus knows that human beings have a great capacity for goodness, righteousness and love, and also a capacity to misunderstand, run from the truth, be fearful, be vengeful, hurt one another, and he is speaking to that truth here.

But Jesus quickly adds these words of comfort and hope...listen to John 3:21

But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

Those true to the divine spark within them, those aligned with the Spirit of God that surrounds them, those who hear my words and understand, who turn to the light, they come to me, they recognize me and it is then that their deeds are done in communion with God.

When we pause to read a Scriptural passage deeply, going back to uncover the references found in other parts of the Bible, reflecting on each line to discern the treasure that is hidden there, then we have stopped power browsing, we are not being mere “decoders of information.” Today, in 2009, when we engage in deep reading of our sacred texts, we are being counter cultural because we are not conforming to the practice of skimming passages, scanning the text, and skipping from verse to verse as is commonly done.

When we invest the time in deep reading and deep thinking about Bible stories and Scriptural passages, we do what Jesus invited Nicodemus to do, to make “rich mental connections” between the Hebrew Scriptures and the gospel Jesus brought to the world.

Today Julianna read Psalm 42 to us and we heard these beautiful words,

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Deep calls to deep...*

My friends, this Lent, and in the weeks that follow Easter and in the months ahead, let your soul long for God, let your soul thirst for God, let deep call to deep.

If you slow down enough to read deeply and think deeply I promise that you will find new meaning in the old words of Scripture, new life in the old stories you know so well, new significance in word or a phrase you had hurried past.

Deep calls to deep...deep reading and deep thinking provide deep insights and inspire deep change.

May you find in the months ahead that your soul longs for God, that your soul thirsts for God.

And may you experience that pull, that call, that draw when deep calls to deep.

Amen.