

March 14, 2021
Fourth Sunday of Lent—Year B
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Num. 21:4-9
Psalm 107:1-3; 17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

Jesus the Trickster

At the outset, I would like to highlight that in today's Gospel, we have the famous John 3:16 passage. As a kid who grew up in a Christian tradition that emphasized biblical literacy, I think I had this verse memorized before I knew how to add and subtract numbers. It is seen as a centerpiece for how many Christians understand salvation. Believe in Jesus. Get saved. Because God sent Jesus to save you. Let's keep that in mind. We are dealing with a foundational text of modern Christianity.

As a father of three kids, I have found myself subjected to watching more Marvel movies than I care to mention. It was just this last week that I found myself sitting on the couch with Eli and Eden and watching, again, one of the series of Thor movies. I mean no offense to Marvel comic fans, but these movies tend to drive me nuts. They tend to force ancient mythologies into two-hour sagas with the usual tropes of quick romance and fireballs of violence. The Thor series cast actors such as Anthony Hopkins, Idris Alba, Natalie Portman, and Chris Hemsworth. The series revolve around loosely referenced Norse mythology involving Thor and his magic hammer, Odin and his fatherly wisdom, and Loki's mischievous ways. I believe every single episode in this trifecta of cinematic mash-up has Thor—Chris Hemsworth—shirtless. (Cue picture) Thor is the hero. He undergoes typical hero journeys and bildungsroman-esque character transformations. As I watched the third movie, Ragnorak, a reference to the virtual end-of-the-world mythology of the Norse, I started to notice the generalities: 1.) The movies thrive on sibling rivalry. Just like Genesis, I might add. 2.) The plot circulates the father-son relationship complex. The all-knowing Father educates the chosen son until the son is ready to be king through self-sacrifice. Very similar motifs to Jesus and his father. But the movie is Hollywood typical. The bulging biceped Thor wins through a kind of bumbling violence with erratic moments of insight—or luck.

But that isn't why I mention Thor today. I'm more interested in Loki, Thor's brother. Hollywood characterizes him as a self-serving, weak snake-like character. He is devilish. But of course, Loki is a mythic character with centuries of ideas swirling around his persona. In short, Loki is a trickster. In ancient cosmology, Loki's parentage are the giants who live outside the gates and walls of Asgard, the

home of Loki's adopted father Odin. Asgard is a place of light and immortality. It is separated with the rest of the created order by walls. Loki seems to move back and forth between the world of giants and Asgard. He is known as a shapeshifter.

To some extent, and relevant to today's biblical texts (yes, I'll get there), Loki is associated with snakes. Norse mythology says he has a son who is a giant snake that is large enough to encircle the world and eat his own tail. Among the references to Loki's son, Jörmungandr, one particular narrative involves Thor wielding his hammer and battling the giant snake. Thor kills the giant snake but also dies, succumbing to the venom of the Jörmungandr. You can see a depiction of this story in the 11th century Altuna Runestone. Now I don't have the time to delve into the specifics, but you may be hearing interesting resonances between Norse mythology and our own Christian thematics. For now, I will merely note that early Christians heard similar patterns and even integrated them into their own symbology. Note the 10th century Anglo-Saxon cross which has part of Thor's battle with Jörmungandr, among other Norse mythologies etched along the cross.

Now Loki is a trickster. Cultures around the world have these personas. In a wonderful book called, Trickster Makes This World, Lewis Hyde investigates the trickster found in ancient stories. From Native American stories about the coyote to the Norse mythology of Loki, tricksters are characters who seem to live in two worlds. They are border crossers. They transition between two worlds. They transgress institution and divinely sanctioned boundaries and categories. They are wise and cunning. In his book, Hyde notes that the trickster plays with the distinction between accident and essence. Or coincidence and significance. Tricksters are hard to trust. They are constantly violating sanctioned rule and laws. They flirt with our established order. For this reason, I believe tricksters are often associated (like Loki) with snakes. They seem to exist in a kind of other world. Slithering out of holes in the ground. They surprise us. Scare us. And they can be truly dangerous.

Why am I delving, superficially, into Norse mythology? And why did I subject you to Hollywood's version of it? Well, I think Hollywood got something wrong. But I think it relates to how we also miss something within our own Christian understanding of Jesus. Let's look at a few of the serpentine biblical texts including the ones we heard today.

Scene 1: Eve is tempted by a serpent who is called “the wisest of the animals.” (Gen 3:1)

Scene 2: Aaron throws down his staff in front of Pharaoh who wears the uraeus crown. A crown with raised cobras—symbols of divine power wedded to empire. Aaron’s staff becomes a serpent and eats Pharaoh’s serpent. (Ex 7:10)

Scene 3: The Israelites start complaining about how crappy the desert is. About how Egypt was better. Snakes begin to kill the people. God tells Moses to craft a bronze snake and raise it on a pole. The people look to the snake and are cured.

Scene 4: In a purging of idolatry from Israel, King Hezekiah finds the ancient relic of Moses. This is what he does: “He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it”

Scene 5: Jesus cryptically describes himself as the bronze snake. Coming before the great evangelical text of John 3:16, we are told that the Son of Man will, like the bronze snake, be lifted up for the salvation of all.

Now that’s a whirlwind of contradiction. How in the world am I to understand Jesus as both venomous snake that kills and emblazoned snakes that heals? How am I to understand this pole? This cross that saves? The suggestion I would like to make is that Jesus—as bronze serpent—is like Loki. I would like to suggest that Jesus is a unique kind of trickster. This will raise more questions than it answers, but let’s focus on one. If Jesus is a kind of trickster, what kind of boundary does this trickster transgress?

Here are a few immediate examples:

Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Find God in the margins. Give up all that you possess. Forgive those who wrong you. Deny the borders of self-interest.

Last week, Jesus upended marketplace religion. Jesus the trickster shifted ideas of religion in God in his day, and he continues to deconstruct our notions of God.¹ He goes into the institutional heart of religion and turns it over. As a trickster, Jesus

¹ I owe the idea of Jesus deconstructing things to John Caputo’s book “What Would Jesus Deconstruct?”

destabilizes our notion of God. For Jesus, God is the ultimate word for a great negation. Not a thing. Not a created category. Not an image. Jesus the trickster illuminates that God is an intangible stirring within. A connection of events swirling around love. God is an event that we succumb to. God is the movement beyond categories. God does not live in the temple. Nor does God live in Church.

Tyrannical Christianity tries to maintain a notion of purism. Tyrannical Religion builds walls and maintains supposedly static narratives. We are told outside those walls are devilish syncretistic energies. Unholy mixing. But this is a deceit. We do not and cannot live as first-century hermits maintaining a religion that does not change. Everything is inter-textual. We understand stories with other stories. We understand our own lives only through other stories.

There is always a fine line between coincidence and significance. Between accident and essence. Sometimes that line collapses. We build the walls and Jesus tears them down. Please remember, Christ was crucified outside the city gates. Jesus the trickster fiddles with our notions of who is in and who is out. With our simple definitions of power, of categories that stabilize our own hubris. Jesus reminds us that God is trans. A movement across boundaries.

Being a follower of Jesus is, indeed, tricky business. The cross of Christ has been lifted up for centuries, Christ as the bronze serpent. But Jesus is a trickster. Remember that pole is empty. Jesus the snake circumvents our notions of power and even reality. For in Jesus, the line between death and life was also transgressed.

During the Lenten period we are reminded that we are always living within this transition. The empty pole. The empty tomb reminds us that we follow a trickster. A divine figure that transgresses those lines of separation with the cataclysmic prospect that all—everything—can be joined together. The cross of Christ is not meant to be treated as a thing. As a bronze pole relic housing the divine. No, the cross of Christ is an event. A moment that orbits around a divine stirring. If we raise that cross, then we open our willingness to break apart that which is imprisoned. The cross of Christ is a hammer. One in which even Thor would be jealous.