

Fourth Sunday of Lent, Cycle B

2Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23; Ephesians 2:4-10; and John 3:14-21

Imagine it is okay once again to go to the movies and a good friend tells two others about a movie she knows they will enjoy. She knows how heavily the troubles of the past year have weighed on both her friends; she knows that they both need a lifeline to hope. She has even bought them both a ticket, so they do not have to worry about the cost. Both of these people have a big project due the next day. The first person decides to set aside the project for a couple of hours and get into the movie. And the movie works its magic: it takes him out of his concerns and immerses him in another world. The movie is about a problem that has caused him pain. It has funny parts and sad ones too, but love wins out in the end. The first movie-goer leaves the theater refreshed, even healed and hopeful. Meanwhile the second person goes, but keeps thinking about the project. She uses her phone to do research and text her co-workers. She even checks out prices for repairing her deck; might as well, while there's all this time to kill! As the house lights come up, she thinks, "The trailer for this movie looked stupid and sure enough, it was. I'll never tell my friend but what a waste of time."

We can easily see what was at stake in responding to this gift. The Scriptures for the Fourth Sunday of Lent invite us to ponder God's graciousness and our receptivity. The Chronicler of our first reading points to Jeremiah's prophecy and says, "in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord inspired King Cyrus," a foreigner who knew nothing of God, to liberate the Israelites. Cyrus acted on God's behalf to relieve suffering. The Chronicler wants us to tune into God sending all sorts of people to set us free from our suffering. These liberators are often just as oblivious to being God's instruments as Cyrus was. "Pay attention and rejoice!" the Scriptures tell us today.

Likewise, Eph 2 vibrates excitedly over the gift God has given us in Christ Jesus. Notice all the phrases about graciousness: the richness of God's mercy, the great love God had for us, the immeasurable riches of God's grace showing up in kindness to us, the gift of God and – two times – "by grace you have been saved!" There is nothing here about earned rewards for virtue or cleverness, just pure gratuity, gushing out all over the place. God is offering us a mysterious opportunity. Like the first movie-goer, we can choose to accept the gift fully. If we surrender to it, the story of salvation will do what good stories do, heal us with the creative energy of God. We need rest and play, love and forgiveness. We cannot participate in these things half-heartedly, like the second movie-goer. They gush out of God at us like honey from a rock. "Open your mouth and enjoy!" the Scriptures tell us today.

Our gospel is also about this crazily generous love of God and the loss of control we must have to receive it. In the first half of Jesus' talk with Nicodemus, which we do not read, Jesus explains being baptized with the Spirit. "Like experiencing the wind, the one born of the Spirit is caught in the mystery whose origin and destiny is beyond control."¹ In the passage we do read, Jesus names this mystery: the Son of Man must "be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that God gave God's only son, so that everyone who believes in him... might have eternal life." What would it look like to accept this gift and let it do its magic on us? We could begin to live differently. Like the first movie-goer, we could move beyond wounds and exhaustion with a renewed heart. A choice to accept fills us with new life and a choice to reject God's liberating love leaves us worse off than before. These choices show in our subsequent actions. Theologians call this "realized eschatology." Our ultimate choice for or against God is happening now and is visible in our deeds. "Step into the light and truly live!" the Scriptures tell us today.

God meets each one of us with a gift we could really use. The gift of salvation, of eternal life, of liberation, of light instead of darkness, is offered to each one of us. What will we do with it?

- ❖ When you consider your openness to God's generous love, are you more like the movie-goer who got into the movie or the one who kept working on other things?
- ❖ Who has been setting you free lately from suffering? Recognize God's hand in it.

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¹ Francis J. Maloney SDB, "John" in *The Paulist Biblical Commentary*, 2018, p. 1127.