

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz
“Moving Beyond Snakes”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, March 14, 2021

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 impatient 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 3:14-21

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.

‘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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 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.’

As we continue our journey through this season of Lent, we continue also to explore how anxiety is a part of this journey for us, for Jesus' travel to Jerusalem makes his disciples and his followers more and more anxious as they increasingly come to understand how his movement towards Israel's political and theological center, is a serious threat to Jesus' very existence. And Jesus' travel to Jerusalem makes him more and more anxious as well as he continually contends with the swirl of physical and emotional and spiritual needs that constantly press in on him. Jesus' travel to Jerusalem makes those who are in charge of official Judaism anxious by the potential loss of their power and control, for when they hear of and see what Jesus is doing among and for God's people, they know, at the very least, that God has raised up a mighty prophet and possibly even the long-anticipated Messiah. And these religious leaders know that their importance ceases when the Messiah comes.

So, there is more than enough anxiety to go around as Jesus journeys on, anxiety that catches our ears and catches in our gut, for we have anxiety of our own; anxiety of our own, which Lent reminds us of; anxiety of our own, which Lent reflects back to us in such a way that our anxiety seems closer, more pressing, even larger. At its most basic level, anxiety is about loss of who we are, the loss of our self, the fear that somehow we have been abandoned or will be abandoned; abandoned physically or emotionally by those we love, by those we depend on, even by those with whom we share our community. And in the face of potential abandonment, we are afraid. And remember, our fears don't have to be logical. We are afraid that if we are abandoned, then we will cease to exist, we will be no more: an existential fear that always spikes anxiety. Anxiety-producing potential abandonment can be physical, but it can also happen at a feeling level, feelings of being uncared-for, of not being respected, of not being accepted, of not being listened to, of not being taken seriously. Any and all of these feelings can seem like

abandonment, can seem threatening, can make our anxiety explode. And when we are anxious, we want desperately not to be anxious.

In our effort to move beyond anxiety, to feel reconnected to others, which helps us feel less anxious in our desire for that less anxious feeling, we can do all sorts of strange things. What we often don't realize about ourselves, I believe, is that some of our earliest life experiences stay with us and can and do shape our thoughts and actions throughout life and that the shaping, sometimes it's helpful, but sometimes it's not very helpful at all. For our response to these early in life-shaping experiences often continues to be our grown-up response to situations that create similar feelings within us. And our childhood shaped adult responses are given not just in our families, but in every organization and in every activity in which we exist and participate, our workplace, our volunteer groups, our recreation and play activities, our faith community. When our early learned responses to particular life situations lead to a challenging adult behavior from us, our challenging behaviors cannot and will not change unless we are intentional, intentional about embracing a new and different narrative for our living and functioning as an adult.

A few weeks ago, I told you that my mother became very ill when I was about a year old. She had thyroid cancer, and while she survived the treatment, this treatment caused her to have an extremely narrowed trachea, which made breathing and swallowing very difficult. As a result of this condition, mom would often choke while eating, choked to the point where today we would give someone in such distress the Heimlich maneuver. When mom started choking, there wasn't anything that the rest of us at the table could do to help her. And so there we would just sit, sit in silence, waiting and wondering if the obstruction was going to clear, allowing mom to start breathing normally again. And as a little boy, though I couldn't put it into words at the time, I think I was sitting there wondering if mom was going to live and what would happen to me if she didn't. Now, please hear me say, I'm not blaming mom for what was going on. Her medical realities could not be helped, but unintentionally, what she lived with every day became, for me, existential anxiety at its best. And this story doesn't just end at my boyhood dinner table, for this learned behavior of growing quiet in moments of crisis translated into adulthood for me as my growing strangely quiet whenever I was in the presence of a woman whom I saw as out of control.

In a former congregation, I staffed the youth committee with a volunteer leader who believed she could always get her way by crying. And she cried at meeting after meeting. One day, the committee chairperson, a practicing psychologist, asked me why I withdrew from the meeting, conversation, and grew quiet every time this particular volunteer leader became emotional. I didn't have an answer. Over time, however, this question and a lot of counseling, led me to make connections between my adult behavior and my childhood dinner table. Since that realization, I've had to work hard and I continue to work hard to practice a new and different response in similar situations where someone is out of control, especially a woman, to practice a response where I do not withdraw and become quiet, a response more in line with being an adult, a response that helps me to push feelings of fear and abandonment to the side not under the rug, but just to the side, giving me a greater sense of self, which in turn helps me to be less anxious, allowing me to be more fully present in whatever situation I am in.

Both of today's scripture lessons deal with snakes. Snakes provide another one of those anxiety-producing feelings that I carry with me from childhood. Things that slither and are potentially poisonous and thus a threat to life, they still set me on edge. Perhaps some of you know what I mean [laughter]. In our Old Testament lesson, snakes represent Israel's fear of being abandoned by God in the wilderness. This fear of divine abandonment may stretch back to Israel's previous captivity in Egypt, echoing a sense of abandonment by God, first felt by the people then. Feelings of abandonment and related anxiety, while very personal, can also be communal. On top of Israel's fear of abandonment, the snakes sent by God also threatened the people with immediate death, which is a whole new layer of anxiety. And while God does eventually provide a way for Moses to deal with the snakes, thus lessening the collective anxiety of the community, I believe Israel's snake-induced, fear-fueled anxiety does not truly begin to be resolved or have the potential to be resolved until our gospel lesson. This little passage from the third chapter of John is best known for verse 16, a verse that I suspect many of us set to memory some time in Sunday school long ago. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life certainly, this is a powerful verse. Yet I find even more significant in this

lesson, is the way that John reaches all the way back to an obscure little story in Israel's infancy about snakes and death and anxiety. How John reaches all that way back because he understands Jesus as the lifted up one who is sent by God as a cure for Israel's anxiety. Jesus becomes a new and different ending to the old childhood snake story, which proclaims that God is to be feared. Through Jesus' faithful caring for God's children, he has lifted up, like Moses' bronze snake was lifted up in the wilderness, showing all that even God, even God, can learn new and different behaviors. Showing that God is truly known in grace and in love, instead of the corporal punishment of a former day. Showing that, through Jesus, God's grace and love is given to disciples of all generations, including us, we who are disciples today. Showing that through this grace and love, we are invited to a new, less anxious way of life.

Interim time can be a time of congregational anxiety. For interim time can drag up feelings of abandonment both for us as individuals and for us together as a community. A pastor has left us, and we are alone in the wilderness. What shall we do? Will we survive? And [now?] look, I think I see a snake over there slithering along. And this is the point where I believe we all have important choices to make. For we can easily and anxiously embrace our old ways of responding to a crisis which we perceive as existential. Embracing responses learned in our distant past. Responses that most likely won't work for us anymore or won't work very well for us here in the future. Or this is our choice. Or we can intentionally choose a new and different way of responding to our anxiety, a way that utilizes the grace and the love gifted to us in Jesus.

The good news that I perceive in our gospel story, in the face of all our anxiety and all our patterns of behavior that needs updating, the good news I perceive here at First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood is a deep and burning desire for a future, a different future, a life-giving future, a future in which we all embrace and live out grace and love with each other in community, rather than our tossing snakes at one another. Now, this new future will take work. It always takes work. This new future will take all of us throwing out our tried and true responses to anxiety--those responses we learned so long ago--throwing them out so that we can embrace the newness that Jesus teaches us. The newness of love and grace and compassion, patterns of behavior which forever give life.

Where do we start practicing these new behaviors? I think we start here in worship as we prayed for each other. And as we meet together on Zoom and write note cards to each other, and check-in with one another by phone. We start as we run into each other out in the community, even with our mask on. We start when we intentionally break bread together, even if it is a meal that is shared virtually these days. So, let's get busy. Let's get busy and make all of this connecting, this restarting, this responding to the grace and love we know in Jesus Christ. Let's get busy so this can happen. Let us make it so because we care about one another and make it so because we're no longer going to let the fear of snakes keep us paralyzed, and make it so because our God loves us so very much. And when we are loved as deeply as God loves us, friends, we can do anything.

Pray with me. Oh, God, we are anxious. Help us to be different. Different by your grace and love. Different in Jesus Christ. Amen.