

SERMON: “Snake-bite?”

First United Church, Waterloo – LENT IV – Sunday, March 14, 2021

PRAYER: “Gracious God, you know the depth of our thirst for your love and our hunger for your transforming power. Speak to our hearts. Instill your thoughts in our minds and enlighten our understanding. Infuse our souls with confident faith, so we pray in the name of Jesus.”

Quick poll: Love them? Hate them? Indifferent?: mice? ... spiders? ... snakes?

Fifteen families, 456 genera, and over 2,900 species of snakes share our planet.

They range in size from the 10cm thread snake to pythons, anacondas who max out at 19m.

The venomous families are the elapids, viperids, hydrophids, atractaspids, and some colubrids.

The three most venomous snakes on earth are found in Australia.

We don't know which species of viper bit and killed some Israelites centuries ago as they wandered in desert wastes after their liberation from slavery in Egypt.

Two candidates have been suggested, both are sand-burrowing, rock-hiding, and side-winding: the larger Field's horned viper, a mottled snake with fiery red spots and wavy stripes on its back, or the smaller saw-scaled viper likewise mottled and spotted.

That one is the sixth most-venomous snake on earth.

Venomous snakes usually only bite to capture their prey.

If they attack humans it's because they've been disturbed. They lash out to protect themselves.

These particular vipers of the Sinai are rather nasty because they dart rapidly and bite repeatedly.

Their bite causes vomiting, bleeding, and eventually, cardio-vascular failure.

Medical researchers are still working on an antidote for saw-scaled viper venom.

If that's the kind of nest those ancient Israelites stirred up as they camped out in that peninsula, it's little wonder those serpents proved deadly to so many of them.

As the biblical story-teller viewed it, those snakes were riled up by God as a punishment.

Even well after thirty years of wandering, those freed pilgrims still find cause to bellyache against a God who had been accompanying them and bailing them out of worry time after time.

This time they kind of clue in. The approach Moses, their leader, confessing:

“We rebelled and messed up when we spoke against God and against you.

Do you think you could pray to God to take these snakes away now?”

Well Moses listened and prayed. The snakes didn't go away, but somehow their harm ended.

God told Moses to fashion a snake out of bronze and fix it onto a pole.

If anyone suffering snake-bite looked up at that snake-on-a-stick, they experienced healing.

So Moses did. So it was. So the story goes. Incredulous as that may seem.

Ages later, when Solomon built the first Temple to God in Jerusalem,

that bronze serpent on a pole was displayed in a prominent place in the chancel.

About 225 years later, when Hezekiah was the ruler of Judah, he undertook religious reform as a pledge to God of his own righteousness similar to his great ancestor David's.

“He destroyed the idolatrous places of worship, broke the stone pillars, and cut down the images of the goddess Asherah.

He also broke in pieces the bronze snake that Moses had made called the Nehustan.

Up to that time, the people of Israel had burned incense in its honour.”

In recent years, archaeologists have unearthed bronze serpent statuary in the region of Timnah, within the Arabah area of the Sinai (close to where the ancient Israelites camped out).

These religious icons date back to the years 1200-1900 BCE and have a Midianite connection.

Similar relics have been found in ancient sites of Jebusite worship in the ancient Near East.

Scholars reckon that these bronze serpents were used as cultic fertility symbols.

Seems that Hezekiah may have sensed such an old foreign religious connection was idolatrous, and did not accept its transfer into Israelite worship as a sign of healing and protection.

Well, wasn't all that fascinating?

However, those parishioners among us who don't like snakes have been squeamish awhile and we best need give them some relief.

I JOHN'S METAPHOR

Soon. Hang in there. In the bit of dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus that we find recorded in the gospel of John, he references that old wilderness story and image.

Jesus, the travelling prophet, is trying to explain to that well-schooled Jerusalem rabbi all that is new as God is re-writing God's covenant with all humanity.

You know that memorable conversation about: *“You must be born again, or born from above”*; and, *“The wind blows where it wills.... So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*

“Listen up, Nicodemus, I am telling you the truth. Oh, how can I help you understand?

Try this on. The new deal will be like this:

“As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Humankind must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so love the world that God gave God's only-begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him many not die but have eternal life.

For God did not send God's Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour.”

Capice? Do you get it? ... At the time, Nicodemus didn't get it.

Later, when he witnessed Jesus hanging and dying on a pole of Roman lumber, he clued in.

We even find him helping remove Jesus' dead body with his friend Joseph of Arimathea.

They take his body of that cross, wrap him in burial linens, and bury him in Joseph's tomb.

By looking up at that snake-on-a-stick in the wilderness,

some wandering ancient Israelites suffering snake-bite were healed, rescued from death.

A good measure of that miracle may be attributed to the reality that, by looking up at the serpent, they were also looking up towards God again in faith,

and foregoing any more complaining and crabbing against the Almighty.

Something about the cross of Jesus, the Christ, has a similar effect.
John the evangelist makes that comparative metaphor: snake-on-pole/Christ on cross.
Want to get rid of all the ungodly, unhealthful toxins and poisons in your life?
Fix your eyes on Jesus, the Christ, crucified and risen.
This too is a matter of life and death, and a hope of living a new, transformed, eternal life.
Faith, not your behaviour or personal obedience and devotion makes that happen.
“Whoever believes ... shall have....”
The power of image. The transforming power of God.

II OTHER TAKERS

We know of other manifestations of that image.
Between Hezekiah’s destruction of the original staff of Moses and the re-use of that image in the gospel of John as a metaphor comparable to the cross of Christ, the ancient Greeks honoured their god of medicine, Asclepius.
The staff of Asclepius, a single serpent, or two serpents, coiled around a pole, remains the sign of medicine to this day. It is known as the caduceus.
In healing centres or Asclepian temples in ancient Greece and Rome, patients slept in rooms where non-venomous snakes freely crawled about.
In subsequent days, they would have appointments with one of the resident priests in the course of which they would talk about their dreams.
The priest would interpret their dreams in such a way as to prescribe a cure for their ailment.
In Eastern yogic thought, snakes in dreams represent our vital spiritual force coiled at the base of the spine. It is preparing to stretch up and out through our minds and heads to a new awareness, a new consciousness, new ways of being and behaving.
Today, Jungian psychologists and dream therapists view the appearance of snakes in a dream as a positive sign. They often represent our habitual inner nature getting ready to move through some kind of change or transition.

A married 31-year-old woman with children grew unhappy as wife, mother, and home-maker. Her traditional upbringing made her feel that all her attention and purpose had to be there. In an attempt at independence she went off to India with a friend. On their way home, they became stranded for some extra days in Hong Kong. Airline strike. Though her children were perfectly all right at home with their father, she worried about being away from them. Shortly after returning home, she kept a previous appointment she had made with a psychologist. During her hour of therapy she talked about a dream she had. She and her husband had gone to India and attended a meeting full of other women. They had difficulty leaving and somehow found themselves waist-deep in a murky, mushy stream full of ducks. Then they found nice hotel where lots of rooms opened onto one another.

Indian music filled the air and hanging from the light fixture in every room was a snake or two. Her husband stayed on the sofa, relaxed and untroubled. She sat beside him and turned her head to notice a snake on the cushion. She yelled and jumped up, and just then, another snake bit her foot. It hurt. The snake clung to her toes even though she banged her foot on the floor. Then the snake bit her in the s-o-u-l (she said, not s-o-l-e) of her right foot. Her husband continued to sit there nonchalant, not swift to her rescue. She shouted: “We shouldn’t have come here!!” As her therapist helped her unpack it, she discerned that her move toward independence was going to be troublesome: “waist deep in a murky stream full of ducks”. Birds are often messengers of the Spirit, but these waterfowl can also dive underwater. This woman would need to delve into her unconscious to rise up a swarm of new possibilities. That was also the implication of a “hotel with lots of rooms opening onto one another”. The snakes represent both the fear and the attraction of wanting to move away from her familiar roles. Her husband was both her actual mate and her own “animus” or inner male persona. Their non-concern about the dangers she is perceiving was a sign of encouragement. Go for it. And the image of the snake biting the s-o-u-l of her right foot indicated that she was facing a very significant shift in how she would seek to live out her life. It had something of God’s call to personal transformation written all over it. It would take her five years to become a stronger, more vibrant and independent woman who could still fulfill her responsibilities as wife and mother. Truth was: her husband and children didn’t need her as much as she thought they did. And, they were all thrilled with her new-found freedom.

In 1707, a church musician was getting ready for a service of communion. There was no great crisis in his life that moved him to write something new. It was more that worship in churches in England had become dull and highly repetitive. The singing was almost entirely rooted in paraphrases of psalms. He found the usual congregational singing of “All People That On Earth Do Dwell” and such frightfully uninspiring. Yet, could he dare something rebellious? He had heard some derogatory critique before about hymns infused with personal feeling: “songs of human composure lacking holiness”. Indeed, a number of them were dreadful. Nonetheless, he proceeded, and, come that Communion Sunday in 1707, his congregation were blown away by his new creation. It would appear later that year in a published collection of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. During his lifetime he would write and compose over 600 hymns and become known as “the father of English hymnody”, Isaac Watts. His new creation didn’t have a bouncy or lively tune, but the melody was fluid, intense, and moving as were the lyrics. That’s still true now. Some consider it to be one of the most stirring and influential hymns of all time. Originally titled “*Crucifixion to the World by the Cross of Christ*”, we know it better as: “*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*” on which the Prince of Glory died

Oh, there are people young or old who don't get church music, and even some who do, who might not be swayed by it. But I am.
That has a fair bit to do with the minister who prepared me for confirmation: Dr. James Gorwill. He wasn't any firecracker of a preacher, but was one utterly sincere and caring pastor. We spent most of our sessions getting ready for confirmation pondering the text of that hymn. He talked about how much it meant to him. We saw and felt how much it resonated within him. He just showed us what trusting faith in Jesus, the Christ, crucified and risen, could mean; how it could shape and inform and transform a person's life.
*"Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."*
It can. It does. It can make a huge difference.
It continues to challenge me and call me to grow in grace and compassion.
Part of that is continuing to divest myself of remnants of sexism and racism and other forms of non-acceptance and disregard that I have imbibed in my culture.
How might you describe how faith in Jesus, crucified and risen, has impacted your life?

CONCLUSION

"As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness (for healing and protection), so the Son of Humankind must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." (John 3:14-15)
It isn't just a Lenten journey, it's the journey of our lifetimes.
It's about getting rid of ungodly toxins and poisons in our lives and in our systems.
It's about getting over self-induced or cultural snake-bite.
It's about finding out who you really are and can be, and helping others do the same.
It's something about fixing one's eyes on the crucified Christ
and then knowing that you too can die and rise again
in an unfolding series of transformations. Praise be to our God who enables that.

I Jean Dalby Clift and Wallace B. Clift, Symbols of Transformation in Dreams, (Crossroads, New York, NY: 1984), page 96-97.