

Facing Our Snakes

The deeper we get into Lent, the more we are challenged to take a deep dive into what some call our "shadow side."

That part of ourselves that remains largely unexamined, until a crisis of one kind or another forces itself upon us.

That's exactly what's going on in our first reading this morning.

The snake bites that the Hebrew people endure is a metaphor for them facing up to their own shadow side; where pain, estrangement, fear and anxiety reside.

And what they discover, years before Sigmund Freud, is that we can't get better until we face the snakes that bite us, that the cure for a snake bite is to look that snake straight in the eye.

Refusing to face what bites us, in other words, denying the traumas and hurts that are part of every human life; that's human nature, it's "the course of this world" as Paul says this morning.

It's the source of resentment and retaliation.

It drives our love affairs with money and power.

And so, the refusal to face our snakes is where our problems begin!

Jesus insists that we face our snakes squarely, fearlessly.

And he goes first.

As he is lifted up — nailed to a tree.

On the cross hangs the one through whom all things are created, and we ask:

Why does the Creator of all that is submit to the barbarity of the cross?

Isn't that the central question of our faith?

A faith that "**begins** at the point where atheists suppose it must **end**."

Our faith begins with utter loss, with the dark night of the cross.

Abandonment, temptation and doubt about everything that exists, that's where our journey of faith **begins!**" J Moltman, *The Crucified God*, modified.

If faith in the crucified Christ explodes the myth of how adorable we are (after all, how adorable can we be when our best thinking kills the Son of God?); then faith in the 'crucified God' explodes every stereotype about 'God'. Id., paraphrased.

The omniscient, omnipresent God, revealed through Jesus on the cross, is nothing like our expectations.

What the horror of the cross reveals is this fundamental truth: that which kills us is also that which cures us.

Meaning that perhaps a life of faith is not so much about following the rules, as it is surrendering to the God who loves us enough to die for us.

"Following the rules" makes it all about us.

“Surrender” makes it all about God.

When we say Jesus is like us in all ways, except sin – we don’t mean he never gets angry or impatient or curses someone out.

He does all of these things, a lot!

What we mean is he always surrenders to God.

Even as he faces his own snakes during those 40 days in the desert.

Even as he awaits the most treacherous snake of all: his arrest, trial and execution.

Surrender is what the faithful life looks like.

It’s what eternal life looks like too.

Surrender allows us to examine our own snake bites, which is when healing begins.

And healing transforms you and I into that which the world needs more than ever, wounded healers reaching out to a broken world.

This is the marvelous invitation Jesus extends to every person.

An invitation to change relationships that stink of injustice and death.

An invitation to foster and nurture mercy, forgiveness, and abundance.

The fact that relationships are broken smacks every one of us on the rear-end the minute we leave the womb!

How much of a life is determined simply by where and to whom one is born?

Some are born into homes suffocating with extravagant privilege.

Others have no access to clean water, education, or even the chance to turn five.

Some are born to families of deep love, while others are raised believing they are an unholy mess.

Everyone is born with a skin color that conditions our sense of who we are.

What we deserve.

Whom we may love.

And whom we should fear.

At our birth, we arrive in a world ready to lock us into categories.

Categories that can and do separate us from one another, and from God.

But if we can summon the courage to face these and all of our snake bites, then these seemingly unchangeable patterns can be undone.

And you and I, no matter the where or when or color of our birth — can be united in healthy, vibrant relationships.

Imagine:

What would our relationships look like if we shared one birth mother and were raised in one loving, nurturing family?

What would our economy look like if we came to believe that we live and work in a world that is our common inheritance?

And not simply a place to be conquered as a prize for the few?

What if we accepted every child as our own?

What if "family first" means every human being is our own flesh and blood? S. Breuer, paraphrased.

What if it's not about waiting for Jesus "To Come Again," as much as it's about recognizing that Jesus is already here, in the flesh?

He's here in the person of the poor, the houseless, the prisoner, the sick.

Maybe if we turn ourselves toward such people, we'll come face to face with Jesus.

If, as a society, we turn toward such folks and act with justice and kindness and mercy, the world might change from one that adores power and violence and prestige, into a world in which we live in harmony and peace and dignity with one another.

The point of "eternal life" is not so much "heaven," it's living life **today.**

Taking with complete seriousness the letting go and trust and willingness to endure uncertainty (and sometimes suffering) — that comes with being, not admirers, but followers of Jesus.

Just so, in refusing to turn toward the least among us, the embodiment of Jesus among us, in re-doubling our worship of power, control and wealth, we create hell.

Right here, now.

Whether that hell be Auschwitz or climate change or those nuclear missiles aimed at everyone — which may head our way someday — if we don't change course.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done **on earth** as it is in heaven," means just that.

By taking on "the mind of Christ," as Paul implores us, this placing of absolute trust in God's goodness, no matter the apparent outcome, is what the doorway into eternal life looks like.

Just as the thief who recognizes Jesus for who he is, as both hang from the cross, when Jesus tells him "today you shall be in paradise," perhaps he's not talking only about heaven.

But that paradise opens her gates whenever we experience God's presence in the suffering and pain of this world.

Call it foolish!

Call it crazy!

Yet, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." 1 Cor. 1:25.

Last week we watched as Jesus overturned tables in the temple and threw out the money changers and animal sellers.

Many folks see this story as an example of Jesus' humanity.

"See, even Jesus can have a bad hair day!"

But it may be that Jesus is challenging our oh so human forms of religion, which is so comfortable with piety and rituals and polite conversation, that we forget the wildness, the unpredictability, the awe, when God actually invades our midst.

It is that wildness, that unpredictability, that the God of awe invites us into, as we come to grips with the snakes that have bitten each and every one us!

To face them, so that healing can begin.

And then, to move willingly into each other's arms.

Moving especially into the arms of the least, the lost, and the left behind.

"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."

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