

ON LOVE AND FEAR, SNAKES AND ELEPHANTS

March 22, 2009: Sermon by Pastor Dan Stern

In today's two featured readings from scripture we have one of the strangest and most obscure AND one of the fondest and most familiar. The two combine well. Together they can help us make sense of our Lenten journey to the cross of Jesus.

I say 'make sense of' our journey to the cross. But we may meander a long time on this journey. And for a while, what we feel, see, and experience may or may not seem to make much sense at all. Is it 'sensible' to be anxious or afraid, to grieve or be lonely, to be in pain or to suffer? Is it 'sensible' to believe in anything *beyond* grief and pain? And complicating things even more: our feelings are often conflictual: during certain hours of the day or night, we may needlessly obsess about, say, a particular health-related worry, and what it tells us of our own mortality; at other times, the problem may be that we're denying legitimate health concerns, maybe delaying necessary treatment or ignoring appropriate solutions. When feelings 'don't make sense', what we probably need most are two things: 1) the inner strength to look squarely at the things we fear; and 2) a tenacious, abiding faith that transcends those things, keeping us calm and sure. Especially during the Season of Lent, we have to find ways to keep the faith even as we take a necessary close look at our life's most difficult challenges and most intimate fears.

Today's texts are helpful in doing this. In the Hebrew Bible, the title for the Book of Numbers is simply "In The Wilderness", which is more illustrative of what the book is about than the name we've been given. Its writings portray a vivid, unsparing picture of the fearful things that haunted the wilderness-wandering Israelites. It also shows us what resulted from NOT facing said fearful things: results such as widespread frustration, divisiveness, anger, rivalry, even hatred and violence. Today's story about the plague of poisonous snakes whose 'fiery' bite caused many to die is highly symbolic. The people ask for God's help, and God provides a way in which the wounds inflicted by the snakes can be healed: simply by looking directly at a bronze serpent which Moses had made and had lifted up high on a pole in front of all the people! At first hearing, it sounds to us like magical hocus-pocus nonsense. But think again: the people were being asked *to face the very thing they most feared* - the very thing most challenging to them at the time. We have to do the same. We have to face the things we fear most.

Ideally, the church should be the safest place of all to deal with uncomfortable things like poisonous serpents. Because we trust God, and because we trust one another - and I realize I'm assuming a lot in saying that - we ought to be able here to talk about anything: our deepest realities, our truest natures, our most haunting past experiences. On Friday night a small group of us gathered here to watch the Phil Donahue-directed documentary, *Body of War*. It was indeed, as the promotions put it, "an unflinching view of the physical and emotional aftermath of war" as seen through the day-to-day bodily experience of a young Iraq War bullet-paralysed veteran. I get it why only a small group of us came. It was difficult to watch. It exposes so much: both big lies AND more personal, privately-held secrets. It looks evil straight in the eye. It also unflinchingly shows the physical, mental, sexual side effects. It wasn't fun. Still I came away feeling grateful that I'd come, and that at least a few of us were able to sit together in our church sanctuary to watch and to hear un-pretty things. Here, because we're a faith community that values what is real more than what makes a nice impression, here where we lift high the cross of Jesus, here, we can safely face it all together. We can and repeatedly do get beyond initial social awkwardness, embarrassment and shame, to places that are tough and authentic, and then beyond the acquired toughness, to places of amazing grace. So we eventually discover that none of the

things we may have for a long time been afraid to examine can cast, even a shadow of doubt upon God's far more permanent and powerful healing love.

This is not, of course, the experience of 'church' that many have known. The cultural norm for 'church' has come to be one of keeping up appearances; of censoring less-flattering human traits; of being nice but not very real. When this happens, the church is not the church. Sometimes there actually ARE snakes coiling on the ground beneath our feet, or elephants right there in the room with us! And we have to acknowledge these things if we're not to be poisoned or trampled underfoot!

Face what you fear...and be healed! Are you starting to make the connection here with Moses holding up the bronze serpent for everyone to gaze at? The bronze serpent on a staff still IS used, by the way, as an emblem of the medical profession. It fits into what we're addressing because who among us hasn't, at times, stalled a bit, when sick, in going to see a doctor? Who wants to go in that door, gaze upon that fiery serpent? Of course, nowadays many of us are afraid of the financial cost of medical care more than anything, but we're also afraid we might just get told that we ARE, in fact, sick! Might be told to take meds with nasty side effects, might be required to endure some invasive procedure that hurts as much as it helps, might be held too long in a less-than-perfectly-clean hospital room for 'observation'. A physician or nurse could administer a snakebite-like shot that ITSELF is poisonous! There could be a viral elephant in the air of that hospital room; lots and lots of scary things in the night accidentally pulverize our immune system.

You may remember last Sunday that I preached about anger, and said it has its proper place in our lives. So does fear. I don't think we should just lay ourselves out flat in front of the elephant's restless foot or naked beside the serpent's fangs. There may be good reasons to be afraid, even to hem and haw and delay up to a point. But eventually, the bottom line has to be this: if we can't or won't examine what's real, we're not really living. So: What ARE our most venomous snakes, where ARE those elephants in the room we may not be admitting are there?

Certainly our own mortality is one of them. We age. Our physical health deteriorates. We may lose our ability to see, to hear, to make love, to remember things. Sometimes we fear dying itself, but just as often, we fear being fully alive. We're so afraid! What if it IS malignant? What if I'm not smart enough to make the cut? Or get fired? Or the marriage fails? What if Al Qaida strikes right next door? What if the world finds out about the abuse, the affair, the alcohol, the incontinence, the child born out of wedlock? What if, what if, what if, and we're ruled then by things we fear, all the things we so deny and privately obsess about.

One of the things I feared most to face when I was younger was my sexual orientation. Coming to terms with being gay took a long time and a lot of attention - in part because of societal prejudice, but also because my deeper nature wasn't all that clear to me in my earlier years. I've always been a person drawn to and attracted by many kinds of people, both women and men. This has been a good thing; I think it has served me well in my calling to the ministry. But I was a slow learner in terms of discovering what works best for me in my personal life. I feared rejection by family and friends. Could I ever be secure in my career, especially if that career turned out to have something to do with the church, the institution to which I was increasingly feeling called? Could I reconcile my beliefs and my sexual feelings? Eventually I came to believe that being a Christian and being gay were not irreconcilable opposites at all. I no longer worry about this in the least. The struggle getting there was worth it. I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Lent is the season especially set apart for Christians to face the things we fear and hate, and to realize that we can do this safely, that none of the things we fear have to consume or destroy us. John 3: 15: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, SO TOO must the Human One, the Son of Man, be LIFTED UP." In other words, for the writer of the 4th Gospel, the image of Jesus being lifted up on the cross is very much like the image of the bronze serpent being lifted up by Moses.

I used to be among those who tend to feel, at least at some level, that the so-called "adoration" of the cross is kind of morbid. The cross, after all, was an instrument of slow murder and torture, a tool of violent oppression! Who wants to worship THAT? And if people DO, isn't that kind of perverse?

But what was missing in my perception of the cross was what I'm going to call the serpent connection. It may come as a surprise, given the dubious role of the serpent in the Adam and Eve story, that in the very early church, Christ was himself called the 'good serpent'! (*Whole People*) According to one early legend, The Apostle John was condemned by the Roman authorities to die by drinking from a poisoned chalice. But as he prayed to have that cup taken from him, the poison turned into a serpent and slithered away. This chalice became for the early church a symbol of healing, and has the image of Christ AS the Good Serpent embedded on it.

Now: lest you still think this a bit weird, try please to remember that it's not about magic at all, but about facing fears directly and about seeing beyond fears. So just focus on the part we supposedly know already: prayer is good for us, confessing our sins, acknowledging our deepest hopes and anxieties before God and with people we trust – these are necessary steps to take in getting our lives unstuck. God does not necessarily take away the things we fear and dread the most. But God DOES give us the ability to deal with these things and get past these things. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow I will fear no evil..."

So: look up to the cross. Really SEE the cross. Fully take into your consciousness that object of torture and oppression, that fearful, awful thing. Don't flinch and don't turn away. To see the cross adequately is not to glorify, torture, or suffering in the least, but rather, has everything in the world to do with OVERCOMING violence and death. To truly face the cross as Christians is to do the same thing the Hebrews in the wilderness did in Moses' time: it is to face facts and know by faith we can make it through to that which is for greater and long lasting. Why? Because nothing can separate us from the far greater and long lasting love. Not blood or guts, not poison or torture, not the exposing of our secrets nor the facing up to our innermost worries. "When we behold the image of Jesus on the cross, we are forced to face everything in ourselves and our society that crucifies innocence and truth." (*Whole People*) When we face the shadow side of our own beings, we come out into light. Like the people in the wilderness terrified by poisonous snakes, we confront the 'shadow aspects' of our lives so our souls can be healed. "Our spiritual task is not to avoid or destroy shadows, but rather, to dispel shadows by bringing them to light."

As we move closer to Holy Week this year, may we become more and more able to face it all, all the harsh and dreadful things we fear most, and in so doing to experience the truth that comes to light and the healing that genuinely does takes place. May it be so, Amen.