

Snake Bit

When you think of all the things that bite us during our lives, whether its abuse or abandonment as children, anxiety and fears as adults, or our obsessions with safety and security; the fact is, we can't get better until we face the snakes that bite us.

The Hebrew people realized this thousands of years before Freud and his field of psychoanalysis, as they discover that the cure for a snake bite is to look that snake in the eye.

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

That refusal to admit that "me first" always fails, that wars only beget more wars, that greed leads not to happiness but to loneliness, the refusal to face our snakes is where our problems begin!

Jesus insists that we face our snake bites squarely, and that insistence is unmistakable as he is lifted up — nailed to a tree.

On the cross hangs the one who creates all things, and the question becomes:

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

That is the key question of our faith, a faith that "begins at the point where atheists suppose that it must be at an end.

Our faith begins with utter loss, which is the night of the cross, abandonment, temptation and doubt about everything that exists, that's where our journey of faith starts!" J Moltman, The Crucified God.

If faith in the crucified Christ explodes the myth of how cuddly and wonderful we are (after all, how cuddly and wonderful can we be when our best and brightest kill the Son of God?); then faith in the 'crucified God' explodes everyone's stereotypes of 'God'. Id., paraphrased.

That the omniscient, omnipresent God, is revealed through Jesus on the cross is nothing anyone ever expected.

And yet, what the horror of the cross shows us is that that which can kill us is also that which can cure us.

Meaning that a life of faith is less about living scrupulously or following all the rules — but a life of faith means surrendering all we are to the God who loves us enough to die for us.

Following the rules makes it all about us.

Surrendering makes it, no matter what happens, 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, plenty of times!

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 bite of all: arrest and trial and execution.

That is what the faithful life looks like — it's what eternal life looks like too.

Once we face our own snake bites, and begin healing, we can turn toward the world that needs so desperately to be healed.

Following Jesus isn't simply about self-improvement, although it is partly that; it's an invitation to be immersed in a most wild and free and unpredictable ... community.

It means changing relationships that stink of injustice and death, so that we might knit together relationships of mercy, forgiveness, and abundance, which is the very definition of eternal life.

That relationships are broken smacks you in the face the minute you leave the womb!

So much is determined simply by where and to whom we are born!

Some are born into homes that are suffocating with unjust privilege.

Others will have no access to clean water, education, or even the chance to live to adulthood.

Some are born to families of deep love, while others are raised believing they are completely inadequate.

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 snake bites, then these seemingly unchangeable patterns can be exploded, and you and I, no matter the where or when or color of our birth — can be sisters and brothers in healthy relationships.

Let me put it this way:

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

What would our economy look like if we insisted 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 little sister or brother, 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 persons of the poor, the houseless, the prisoner, the sick.

If we turn ourselves toward such people, we will encounter Jesus.

If, as a society, we turn toward these folks and act with justice and kindness and mercy, the world will 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 "life eternal" 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 embodiments of Jesus among us, in re-doubling our idol worship of power, control and wealth ... we create hell ... right here: whether that hell be Auschwitz or Syria or the nuclear missile we all feared was heading our way — and which may yet head our way if we don't change course.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" means exactly THIS.

That taking on the mind of Christ, as Paul implores us, this placing of absolute trust in God's goodness, no matter the apparent outcome, this 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 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 heard of Jesus overturning tables in the temple and throwing out the money changers and the 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, with our apparent piety and comfortable rituals and polite discussions, with the wildness, the unpredictability, the awe, that happens when God actually invades our midst.

And it is that wildness, that unpredictability, that the God of awe invites us into, to model our lives after; to come to grips with the snakes that have bitten each and every one of us — to face them until we begin healing; and then, to move boldly into each other’s lives, especially the lives of the least, the lost, the losers.

“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.”

+amen

