

March 15, 2015 Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21 Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

Where the Wild Things Are

What have been some of your worst travel nightmares? Sometimes it is the effects of polluted water resulting in digestive troubles or parasites. Other times it might be unwelcome critters on the bedroom walls or under the bed or heaven forbid – in the bed! As a child I was convinced there was a wild and ferocious wolf living under my bed which would bite at my ankles when I tried to get out of bed. I recall a wonderful trip to PEI in my youth which led to a near death experience when I stayed at a camp ground near the home of Stompin Tom Connor. Our tent was pitched on a beautiful beach of red sand and I heard that this was a good time to search for some clams. We collected a bucket full and steamed them over an open fire. Those clams were an acquired taste for sure, but it was the sickness that came in the wee hours of the morning that made me wish I could die before morning, which I learned later could in fact have been a reality since there was probably a ‘red tide’ that day. Whatever journey we are on, we never really know what adventures and dangers lurk around the corner, including the journey of life.

And so it was for the Israelites as they moved forward from one of their recent military exploits to find the promised land, the land supposedly flowing with milk and honey. We all know the slogan, “getting there is half the fun”, but the book of Numbers shows us that, for Israel, there was not much fun getting to the land of promise after their escape from Egypt. There were rebellions and complaints from the people. There were shortages of food and water. There were battles with kings and peoples already in the land through which they traveled. They complained to Moses who complained to the Lord. They were not having an easy trip. And then there were snakes!

It reminds me of the summer that my Uncle Ken and Aunt Carrie rented an old clapboard summer house on Wolfe Island near his old homestead, hoping for a care-free summer with their five small children in tow. It was wonderful for a while, until the snakes started to show up – in the house! My aunt was a masterful complainer and we all heard about it for years to come. Needless to say we did not visit them much that summer.

The Israelites had good reason to complain - people were bitten and were dying. Was this God’s way of punishing them for speaking against God and the journey they were on? Did the original writers of this story really believe that God would punish the beloved people in such a painful way? Perhaps they were beginning to understand that God was serious about this journey, about this relationship that had begun with the covenant with Noah and then Abraham and Sarah. Perceiving that their God had more authority and

power than them, they repented, they opened their minds and hearts again to trust their God, and God intervened in their lives. As God listened to the complaints of the people, the power of the snake to bring evil and death into their lives was transformed to become instead a vehicle for healing. And so it is when we listen deeply to the complaints of another person or group.

Moses was told to put the poisonous serpent on a pole so that those who were bitten would look at it and live – be healed. As a Christian I have difficulty in believing that God is a punishing God, a God that had intentionally sent these snakes in the way of the people to test them, to harm them. That is inconsistent with understanding God as revealed in Jesus, as a God of love and compassion. Rather, I would focus of the way in which Moses, through a simple heart-felt act of prayer, was strengthened by God to look at the snake, one of God's own creatures, in a new way. He was given the courage to look directly into the face of what he and his people feared, what was evil to them and to determine how it could be turned into a source of strength and healing.

The serpent has long been an important symbol in many religions, including our own story of Adam and Eve, whether he is seen as the Tempter or as the vehicle whereby Eve and Adam received wisdom. In Matthew's gospel Jesus encourages us to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

The **serpent**, or snake, is one of the oldest and most widespread mythological symbols. Snakes have been associated with some of the oldest rituals known to humankind and represent dual expression of good and evil. In some cultures snakes were fertility symbols, for example the Hopi people of North America performed an annual snake dance to celebrate the union of Snake Youth (a Sky spirit) and Snake Girl (an Underworld spirit) and to renew the fertility of Nature. In other cultures snakes symbolized the umbilical cord, joining all humans to Mother Earth. The Great Goddess often had snakes as her familiars—sometimes twining around her sacred staff, as in ancient Crete—and they were worshiped as guardians of her mysteries of birth and regeneration. The snake has been an important symbol in Jewish, Greek, Nordic, Indo Chinese, African and Native mythologies.

In our culture we are most familiar with the medical symbol for healing as two snakes wrapped around a pole. Some say that the Caduceus became established in the US as a result of mistakes and confusion. Other countries have used the Rod of Asclepius as the symbol of healing.

What is important for me in this story is the way in which the relationship the Hebrew people had with God gave their leaders the courage to help them face their fears directly and to find healing instead of pain and suffering – beginning with the act of prayer.

So what are the fears that plague us, which we can be encouraged to face and to find healing and support? Is it loneliness? Is it our limited financial resources? Growing old? Not being forgiven for past mistakes? Physical pain? Someone who is intimidating us? Political fears? Terrorist plots close at hand? Our changing climate? Fearing the food we eat? Fear of not being in control? Fear of change itself? Fear of death?

In John's gospel chapter 3 we meet a man called Nicodemus who was a Pharisee, a well-respected accomplished leader in his community who was an expert in the law. If anyone should have it all together, be above fears of all kinds, it would be him. However, we learn how he visits Jesus in the dark of night, wishing not to be seen visiting him, to appear helpless, with many questions on his heart and mind, fears about the future, wondering where Jesus received his power to perform so many signs. Jesus told him he had to be born from above. What did that mean exactly? Taking a larger, cosmic view? See the world and your own fears and problems as God would see them? But how would you access that viewpoint? How would you receive the gifts of God to learn in a new way? How could you be born again?

Jesus then engages Nicodemus in a conversation about being spiritually reborn through God's Spirit. What is interesting for us today is how he connects with the story of Moses, lifting the snake up on the pole as a source of healing and says that when Jesus is lifted up in the same way, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. It is not an easy image to connect with, but full of depth and mystery.

“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.”

God is not interested in punishing people, in damaging the world, turning the wild things of the earth into vehicles of harm and fear, but rather Jesus reveals to us that God's motive is to love the world, to love people and animals, and the growing things of the earth. The word healing comes from the word salve which means to heal, to cure, to make good and so the saving work of Jesus is about healing the world, healing our souls, minds and bodies.

In the symbol of the cross, in the death of Jesus, where God's intentions, God's love was tried and convicted, our own fear of death, our despair about our failed humanity are named and recognized. But somehow, just as the snake was raised up in the desert for a lost and despairing people, when Jesus was raised up on the cross, when he was buried in the tomb for 3 days, when he was raised up on Easter morning, when he was raised up with God through the ascension, then that fear and grief was and is transformed. At its heart, the cross is a paradoxical yet healing image and certainly not simple.

As John reminds us, God does not come to condemn nor to make our condition worse, but God accompanies us to face our fears with us, to confront head on the wild things that suppress our life, to forgive us, to heal us, to send us out again on the path of eternal life. Jesus Christ is the gift given for you, for me, and for our sometimes terrifying world and all that is asked of us is to believe.

I would like to close with a poem written by Andrew King, a 60 year old customer service worker in Oakville who works for a fast food restaurant, a lover of the lectionary, an aspiring poet and also a member of the United Church.

Poem For The Sunday Lectionary (Lent 4, Yr B)

THE SERPENT DIES (Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3: 14-21)

No need to explain how the serpent's bite
surfaces (stealthy as the coming of night)
while you're reading the news; or worried and alone;
or when suffering long; or when a doctor intones
challenging words; or when darkness falls;
or the voice on the end of the telephone call
declares a once-loved relationship done;
when hope seems lost, when joy seems gone.

No need to explain how this serpent hides
next door to our hearts, marks left inside
where poison drips from the tip of its fangs:
in rage, in bitterness, in lonely pangs
of guilt and regret; in the resentments we bear.
And in hurts that we cause we do our own share
of spreading its toxin and resulting grief.
The serpent is death – the fear of it. Relief
ever seems to elude us; but we may declare
its ultimate defeat; for above its shadow there
rises greater light – see, lifted up,
the one who for us drank the cup
of suffering, whose love even in death
conquered its evil; by whose living breath
we also may thrive. We turn trusting eyes,
snake-bitten, upon Christ, and the serpent dies.

