

(...and you think we have it hard- with a downturn in the economy)

I want to tell you a story. It is true, very true. It is also very old. It belongs to the time of the Exodus, about 3,300 years ago. Old and true. The people of Israel had fled Egypt through powers and wonders of the Lord and had entered the desert wilderness to the borders of the Promised Land.

Because of their doubt and disobedience, the Children of Israel were left to wander for forty years in that desert they had chosen for themselves, (a story which itself deserves a sermon or two). They wandered and continued to test God along the way, saying things like, "Let's go back to Egypt. At least there we were fed and had homes where we could live in one place." They also upped the ante of their complaints beyond the physical, to the spiritual. "Who of us has seen God? To which of us has God spoken? Who among us can say he or she believes all the tales our fathers and mothers left us? Who?"

This time, the consequence wasn't forty years of wandering, but was much more immediate. This time, the story says, the Lord sent snakes into the camps to bite these quarrelsome people. So there were droves of snakes moving through the Israelite camp...snakes in the tents, snakes in the breadbaskets and the cooking pots, snakes in the bedrolls and snakes in the cribs; not a happy scene.

Then Moses fell on his knees and prayed for God's mercy. God heard this prayer and told Moses to take a consecrated brass vessel and hammer it into the image of the serpents that were attacking them. Moses did so and wound the brass snake around the crosspiece of his staff and then ran through the camp holding the staff aloft and calling out to the people in the throes of agony, "Look up! Look up and be saved! Look up! Look up and be saved!"

And the Bible says that those who believed Moses, those who stopped looking down at the snakes, who stopped trying to pull them off of themselves and their children, but looked up instead at the brass snake ... these people did not die, but were saved. This doesn't mean that they weren't bitten, just that those who looked up and not down didn't die of their wounds.

Just a short time later it was these very people who themselves claimed the land of milk and honey God promised them so long before.

It's a good story, and a very true story. What the story recognizes is that all of us are going to be bitten - painfully bitten - in this life. Most of us learn that truth fairly quickly just from experience. None of us are exempt from difficulties, or heartache, or disease...But, according to the story, it's not the being bitten that we can do anything about in this imperfect world; it's only how we respond to being bitten that we can control.

When we look up, we can be saved by the very act of faith, for it's when we look down and obsess with what is tormenting us that we then give it power by the very attention we give it.

The story of the snake is, therefore, superb psychology and the stuff of great wisdom, and if we were to leave the story of the snake right here, I would hope you would deem yourselves as having been well served just by having heard it again; but we can't leave it there ... or I can't anyway.

If in this country of ours where 97% of us say we believe in God and where 86% of us presently claim to be Christian in our exercise of that belief, if in this country religion journalists and analysts like me ask the 86% what their favorite verse of Christian scripture is, the answer overwhelmingly would be - and always has been - John 3:16: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him might not perish, but have eternal life.

Jesus of Nazareth is the speaker, of course, and he is speaking about himself to Nicodemus, a leader who had come to him under cover of darkness to inquire whether or not this teaching carpenter might indeed just possibly be the messiah. So it was in the context of answering Nicodemus' query that Jesus spoke the words of John 3:16.

They are good words, and they sit reassuringly upon our ears. They were, however, troubling to Nicodemus, for John 3:16 is preceded by John 3:14 & 15, verses Nicodemus himself heard but which we today almost never think to be curious about, much less to actually look up and read. The whole of what Jesus actually said, according to these verses, is this:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him might not perish, but have eternal life.

It is one of the two or three times that the Christ whom we Christians name as Son of God ever reaches back into the Torah of his people and lays direct, specific claim to the events and actions of his human life as being re-enactments or realizations of specific events and actions in Jewish history. The minute he did, however, the minute Jesus said, "As was Moses' snake on a cross to a plan of release, so is my death on a cross to a plan of salvation," the minute he did that, he stepped beyond wisdom and beyond psychology and into that component of religion that is mystery. To be specific, he took the religion of Judaism and applied a new and scandalous mystery to its wisdom, a mystery into which Nicodemus could not at that time follow him, a mystery of so great a creating love and so eternal, daring, and intricate a plan for the creature that only grace can make it palatable and only faith can receive it.

And that, finally, is what the story has taught me and what I hope to give away to you today; for if my years as a writer in the field of religion have made me aware of anything at all, they have made me wrenchingly aware that ours is the first generation in America's history for whom one of the burning questions will be how every single one of us deals with, respects, and inhabits a culture of many faiths and many gods while living with intellectual and spiritual integrity in allegiance to only one of them.

The truth of the matter - and we would be very foolish to not profess it - the truth of the matter is that all religions deal in human psychology. All religions likewise offer us wisdom - much wisdom, wisdom that is useable, effective, and of worth to all humankind; wisdom that, because it is sound, is also very similar in substance, from one religion to another; for it is in their mysteries and not their wisdom that religions differ.

How the wisdom of any given religion slips over into its mysteries - the mechanisms, the devices, by which it accomplishes that transport - these are how the followers of that religion slip the traces of time and space in order to enter awe. And ultimately we all - body, mind, and soul - come to be like that unto which and before which we bow.

All of which is to say that my yearning, keening wish for all of us in this time and place is threefold: First, that we may live out our lives deeply respectful of religion wherever it exists in our world and deeply appreciative of the wisdom within the various religions of that world; second, that in doing these things and exercising these attitudes of appreciation and respect, we will come never to confuse the wisdom of religion with the mysteries of religion; and last, that while functioning as a faithful citizen of the world, each of us may also live as one forever held in the amazement of a specific religion. Amen

In response to the complaints, God becomes both the enemy and the redeemer. The snakes run loose against the people in punishment. God does not take them away, but leaves the threat in force. At the same time, he provides release in the form of the bronze serpent Moses erects.

So the law has not ended yet, not in a permanent historical sense. It retains its force wherever it sounds its accusing voice, attacking the conscience, looming in threat over the future. It ends only in Christ, as he is raised in us, abolishing the old self to create a new one shaped after himself. Until such a time as Christ is raised in us, Jeremiah's text remains for us - as for the people who originally heard it - a word of hope. Easter and Good Friday are inseparable. The risen Christ bears his wounds. Until the new age drives the old into passing, God's friendship with us will have the marks of the cross, and Lent, as any other day in the life of faith, will be a time of repentance. God's idiom - his unqualified commitment in combination with his inscrutable way of shaking his people right to the limit - exposed all of our attempts to make do without him even as it shows the way to the freedom it establishes in Christ.

The only way to overcome the poison, to get the venom out of the system and out of the heart is to regard the Son of man, crucified, and rejoice in the completeness of the plan of salvation. God raised his Son so high that all the world may look up, see him, believe him and live. Forever!