

**Sermon: What Are You Afraid Of?** (March 22, 2009, Lent 4)

How many people here are afraid of snakes? I couldn't remember if I'd told you my snake story from my trip to Singapore and Malaysia, so bear with me if you've heard this before. When I was visiting a friend from college in Singapore back in 1989, I took the opportunity to go to one of the cultural shows held for tourists in the Old Town's central market. It featured local dances, many of which I had learned from my friend, local music and - you guessed it - a snake charmer. One of the things tourists were invited to do was to have their pictures taken with an enormous python. I've always been afraid of snakes, but I remembered reading in a children's book years ago that they weren't cold and slimy, like I'd always imagined, but that they were actually quite pleasant to the touch. I figured this was my chance to get over my fear of snakes; besides, it would make a great photo to show the folks back home - they'd never believe it. So down I went to stand in line, and when it came my turn, the snake charmer draped the heavy coils of the python around my shoulders, and one of the other tourists took a picture with my camera. To my great surprise, the python's body was smooth and dry and quite attractive to the eye, and its weight had a solidity and even a comforting quality to it - though I'm sure I would have felt different if it had started to squeeze! I haven't been afraid of snakes since then, though I've certainly been startled by them a time or two.

The story from Numbers today provides us with an interesting image: of a bronze snake erected in God's name that saved the people from the snakes they feared. It was in facing the symbol of their fears that they were healed. And the Gospel lesson reminds us that the cross of Jesus is like that: in the cross, symbol of so many things human beings fear, we can find freedom and healing from all those fears - but only if we turn and face the cross, if we keep it in our sight and in our focus.

*What are you afraid of?* When I think about the cross of Jesus, I see in it so many of the things we fear: physical pain, suffering, betrayal, abandonment, being alone, and most of all, the dreadful grief and pain of a risky love. The gospel lesson tells us "for God so loved

the world" that Jesus came to us, loved us, lived for us, and died a terrible death for us. I can only imagine the pain God felt that terrible Friday on Golgotha. The pain of a father over a son, or, if we take the idea of the Trinity seriously, the pain of the Father who suffers with and in the Son. It is a Crucified God we worship, a God who was willing to take on all the pain in the world for the sake of love. "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved."

There are so many fears that bedevil us in this life. One of the most powerful is the fear of love and the pain that comes with genuine loving. A wise woman once said to me, "grief is the price we pay for love". For a long time I had it written out and tacked on my bulletin board, because I think it is one of the truest things I've ever heard. Love is risky; love makes us vulnerable; love makes us open to being hurt. Just ask the parent whose heart is broken by a child who has turned away from them and toward a life style that will lead to self-destruction; ask the woman whose husband has left her after 20 years of marriage; ask the man who has lost the woman he has loved for 50 years to cancer. Just ask the woman who has poured her heart and soul into a project for the good of the community, only to be stonewalled everywhere she turns. Ask the parole officer who has seen one of his parolees for whom he had great hopes, arrested for yet another break and enter. Ask the minister who has given everything he has to the church he serves, only to be told, "I'm sorry, but we can't afford you anymore". To love is to experience pain...and so, many of us turn our backs on it, unwilling to take the risk, to make ourselves vulnerable. Our fear controls our choices, and we choose to live with hearts of stone, instead of hearts of flesh. But to be controlled by fear is to live only a half-life, whatever that fear may be. We are called as Christians to face those fears head on, and to seek the power of God and the healing of God as we work through those fears. We look at the cross of Jesus, and we know what God was willing to risk for our sakes. Wsee that out of that risk came life for us all: a life so different from the life of fear that it is as if we have died and been reborn into a fresh new world.

I once asked a mixed group of clergy and lay people whether there is ever a time when the potential cost and risk of loving is too much - and they replied, somewhat to my astonishment, with a unanimous, "Never!". For them, loving is worth any pain, any grief, any cost. And I thought to myself - there it is...that's Christianity, that's faith. I believe that faithful people can take those kinds of risks, because they know that God has gone before them and is behind them - because they know it is God's intention that by facing our fears we will find new life. Whatever it is you are afraid of, facing it within the security of God's loving embrace can rob it of its power.

*There is a classic story about two monks, on a journey together, who came across a woman standing beside a river. The woman was very beautiful and the water was too deep for her.*

*One of the monks lifted her on his shoulders and carried her across. The second monk was astounded. "How could you do such a thing? he demanded. "You know our vows. It was very sinful for you to touch that woman, let alone carry her across a stream!" And the monk went on and on about the sin of the first monk until finally the first monk interrupted him.*

*"Brother", he said softly, "I may have been wrong in what I did, but I set that woman down by the side of the river. Why are you still carrying her?"*

When we try to avoid our fears, and fail to face them head on, they continue to bedevil us. When we face them in the strength of God, they have no power to harm us. We are able to let them go, give them up to God, and continue on the journey, forging ahead into the future God intends for us.

This facing fears is essential for many different kinds of healing. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous know that they have to face their problem head on and share with others what they have found helpful in dealing with it. Ignoring a problem will not make it go away. Part of the healing process of many people who have been physically or sexually

abused as children is to face and confront their abuser with the truth about the past. Once it is confronted and dealt with it can cease to become such a heavy burden.

Putting down such burdens is not always an easy task because the heavier they are, the harder they are to shed. I am not going to pretend that letting go of all of our fears is as simple as my few seconds with a snake wrapped around my shoulders. The movement from the old life into the new can be a terribly painful struggle, as we try to shed the conditioning of years, the deeply-ingrained doubts and anxieties, the threat of disappointment, the terror of betrayal. The process of healing may be like the purging of poisons from our veins, the dreadful struggle of a night on Calvary's hill. But oh, the joy, when at last we are able to let go of our fears and are able to live and love abundantly!

Many of us do not feel we have the strength to make this journey alone. And it is not a journey I would suggest *anyone* undertake by themselves - for the journey can be long and hard, and it is too easy in the dark times, to lose focus - to believe, like the people of Israel did, that the past, no matter how painful or imprisoning or empty, is better than this dangerous unknown we face.

How many times have people given up their journey to a new life because the way was too hard? Women and men leaving abusive partners, students in the middle of a long and hard course or even young people on an all night youth group lock-in to raise money for a worthy cause, sometimes feel that going back or quitting is far more promising than finishing what they had set out to do. Sometimes it seems harder to go on than it would be to go back. But to look back, to turn back, is to risk everything. We must keep our eyes on the dream that is before us, the life that is held out to us, the hope that is in us, and not let our fears get the better of us.

*Many of you will remember the movie "Chariots of Fire". It tells the true story of two world-class runners. British medical student, Roger Bannister was the first person to run a*

*mile in less than four minutes, an astounding physical and psychological feat. But then, not too long afterward, the Australian athlete John Landy ran it more than a second faster. The two came head to head in 1954 at the British Empire games in Vancouver. It was to be the race of the century!*

*As they neared the finish line, Landy was ahead of Bannister by about two strides, but in that instant where he looked over his left shoulder Bannister shot past him on the right side and won by a couple of yards. Landy had lost his focus, if only for a split second, but it cost him the race. Even though both of them ran it in under 4 minutes Bannister was the winner.*

When we stay focussed on the cross, we are reminded that we do not make the journey alone. God-in-Christ journeys with us, by divine grace giving us the strength we need to reach the goal ahead. When we look at the cross, we see beyond it, to the brightness of an Easter morning, and a new life begun. It is that light, that gift of new life, that we reach for - and as we reach for it, it is placed in our hands. For it is by God's grace that we are saved, healed, reborn - no amount of struggle on our own will get us there. I firmly believe that!

Instead, we look to God, the God who comes to us, not to judge what is past, not to criticize or punish us for our fears, but to show us that though love comes at a price, the reward is well worth the cost. And we look to the community of faith, the body of Christ here among us, to witness to the healing and transforming power of love. Scripture tells us that "perfect love casts out fear". *What is it you are afraid of?* What I have said today applies to any fear we may have: through faith in Christ and the support of the body of Christ, it can be faced and conquered. But I want to keep to the theme of love - all kinds of love.

Love is what keeps us alive: the love of family, the love of friends, the love of one's life partner, the love we find in Christian community, and most of all, the love of God. The price of loving may seem high at times, and the risk very great, but think about what our

lives would be without that risk! No Christmases, no Easters, no Pentecosts, no new life, no joy! Don't let the shadows beneath the cross frighten you away - instead, let the light of God's love shining from beyond it give you hope, keep you focussed, keep you moving forward. Fix your eyes on the life that God has promised, ground yourself in the amazing grace of God, set your heart on the healing love we have known in Christ, and know that new life will be yours, at the end of the journey. Amen