

The Rev. Kate Byrd
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Ophidiophobia

What are you afraid of?

This was the title of a project that my class did when I was in elementary school. Each of us was tasked with going home and polling our families on what they were afraid of, and answering for ourselves. Of course the fears were moderated and subdued, with a selection of choices to choose from, instead of allowing a free for all fear fest. The answers were collected as a bar graph shown in the auditorium to create both halloween decor and a mathematical learning tool. With fears ranging from acrophobia (fear of heights) to phasmophobia (fear of ghosts) the graph showed us that an overwhelming number of people were afraid of creepy crawlies (arachnophobia). But, the number one fear was most certainly ophidiophobia, fear of snakes. I will never forget how showing all the fears with pictures drawn by uncoordinated children posted for everyone to see in a towering life sized graph created both solidarity, in shared fears, and humor, in the silly interpretation of the serpentine creatures as squiggly lines.

Today as we listened to the Old Testament, in Numbers, we get an up close and personal look at ophidiophobia, fear of snakes, as we hear the last in the series of the five “murmuring” stories. The tales of the Israelites continued complaints, as they wandered the desert. Think cross country car rides (before iPads and kindles) with “are we there yet”, “I’m hungry”, “I’m thirsty”, “I don’t want to listen to your classic rock music anymore”, continuous whining. And, now we have drawn the last straw, as the Israelites speak out against God, who has continually provided, and Moses, whose patience must be growing thin. So, if we are speaking on fears, I must confess old-testament-phobia. Because it is passages like these that terrify me not only as a preacher, but as a student of scripture, as they bring me up short. While I would like to be able to explain to you why God would send serpents to bite peoples feet. Or, even more why God wouldn’t just remove the snakes that he sent in the first place, I can’t. But, I can tell you, there is some pretty remarkable stuff in this passage. Because, it is here that we see, again, God’s continued love and protection for God’s people, despite their constant and consistent whining. I mean I have to give God serious credit, because I can barely make it through a morning without losing my cool as my own children continually bug me, “mommy I want cereal,” “mommy it’s my turn to watch tv,” “mommy I don’t want to go to school,” “mommy,” “mommy,” “mommy,” “mommy,” “mommy”. But, here as the Israelites, cease their whining and call out to God to save them from the fatal venom of the serpents, God responds attentively and with loving compassion. As God gives them the ability to gain power over their fears by facing them head on. As Barbara Brown Taylor states... “Once Moses makes it possible for [the Israelites] to gaze fully upon what they are afraid of, they gain access to its healing power... [and] this bronze serpent becomes a treasured sign of God’s power to heal [and give life].”

Too often our fears can become our idols keeping us from seeing God clearly, living into reality fully, and being present to life and those around us. Which is why God takes the very thing they are all afraid of, the snake, and holds it up in front of them. Not as an idol, but as a symbol, and a reminder. That we have more power than we often realize. Power to face our fears, power to join together in solidarity, and power to no longer be controlled by whatever makes us anxious and afraid, as it's held up for us to see and to face. Going on Barbra argues, "If the bronze serpent simply becomes a figure the Israelites believe is responsible for their cure, it becomes an idol. But, if it is a figure that reminds them to turn their gaze and their hearts to God, then it is a sacrament."

As a mother I fear much. I fear failing my children, I fear letting them down, and most of all I fear losing them. And this fear, if I allow it, can all too quickly become all consuming, so much so that if I am not careful it can quickly become a self fulfilling prophecy. As its power paralyzes me so much so it takes me, my attention, and my life away from children without my even knowing it. As I get caught up in all the ways I fear I will fail them, or let them down, or worst lose them, leading me to do so before I even realize what is happening. Which is why the only way I can keep moving forward the only way I can live without allowing these fears to take total control and win out in the end is by lifting them up so that I might see through them and back towards my children and in turn my God and my life.

Here, in our reading from Numbers, God takes the power away from our fears, and gives it back to us, individually and communally. So that we might take our gaze off all that consumes us and move it back out towards God, one another, and the goodness of creation. Which in turn becomes our invitation to live life to the fullest. This is the sentiment, I believe we find Jesus proclaiming to us this morning in our Gospel from John. As he remarks, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Taking on our greatest fears of domination, of loss, and of death! And lifting them all up on that cross, not to show their ability to control us, but to prove our ability to overcome even our worst fears, with and through God. As Jesus reveals in this moment and later on through his death, resurrection, and ascension, the secret to salvation and life to the fullest. Which is simply this belief in God's goodness, God's grace, and God's love. A belief that can give us the power to face our fears head on. SO that we might begin to say no more will we allow our lack of control, our unfulfilled desires, not even our mortality get in the way of embracing this life, loving our God, and living for one another. Because, today we have found the power to face our fears and see through their facade as we look back towards God, towards love, and towards salvation. As Jesus said, "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. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

As we enter the last weeks of our Lenten Season, may we face our fears head on, no longer allowing them the space and room to distract us, to overpower us, or to turn us away from God and one another. But, instead looking through them and towards the one who came to set us free from our fears, as we look towards Christ. Not as a condemning judge, but as a healing gift from God.