

SERMON PREACHED AT SCARBORO UNITED

By Judy Chapman

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“FACING OUR FEARS”

**Readings: Numbers 21: 4-9
John 3: 14-21**

A few years ago I was lucky enough to be invited to “Come Home To Arnprior.” Peter Short, our United Church Moderator at the time invited a group of United Church people from across the country to come together in his hometown of Arnprior, in southern Ontario. The idea was to gather people together to have *conversations* about what was really important to them. It was unusual in the sense that a typical United Church gathering of that magnitude would normally involve a lot of decision-making, such as what happens at General Council. This time we were together just for the purpose of sharing what was on our hearts.

There was *no agenda* other than to hear what might *emerge* as we talked about the church and our relationships within it. A few people seized the opportunity to tell us all the things that they perceived to be wrong with the church. They unloaded their frustrations, fears, anger and unhappiness. One individual was particularly strident in his criticisms and complaints about the church. He had a lot to say, and one afternoon when his fever-pitched judgments reached a crescendo, most of us were feeling a little *wounded* by the criticisms and *weary* of the negativity.

In the awkward silence that followed this tirade, Stan McKay, former United Church Moderator and the first Aboriginal Moderator of our church, rose to speak. He offered us this simple story:

Two people were driving north on the back roads of Northern Manitoba. There were so many bugs hitting the windshield that the wiper blades couldn't keep up. They pulled over, cleaned the windshield and the wiper blades, got back into the car and started on their way again. But the bugs kept hitting the windshield, making it impossible to see ahead. So they

Every day they got up knowing what their tasks for the day would be. They knew where the “watering holes” were, where the markets were, where their sleeping mat would be at the end of the day. Now, in the desert, they missed all those familiar things, they missed all that predictability. And they feared the unknown, the uncertain. They feared that their needs would not be met. And they did what humans beings often do in that situation – they *complained bitterly*.

So, the story says, God sent snakes among them. Now, I don’t think for a moment that God sent the snakes “to punish” the people, any more than I think that God sent the bugs “to obscure the way” for the two travelers in northern Manitoba. But I can believe that there were snakes.

Some suggest that the “snakes” were a symbol of what complaining does to a community. Just as the “bugs” in Stan McKay’s story were symbolic of the things that “bug” us and take us off our path, so the Israelites’ complaining made them forget that they were people called out of slavery by God, and set on a journey toward blessedness.

There are, of course, more literal interpretations of this passage. And when we think of snakes, we usually think of those reptiles that crawl on the ground and instill fear in us. But scholars continue to debate the nature of those “poisonous snakes” or, as it is sometimes translated, those “fiery snakes.” Some of them think that the snakes are a reference to *parasitic worms* that are a common affliction in parts of Africa and the Middle East even to this day.

One common human parasite which lives in stagnant water is a worm known as “the fiery serpent” because of the symptoms it causes. (Anyone with a weak stomach may want to cover their ears for this next part because I am going to talk about this parasite.) Once ingested the larvae of the “fiery serpent” migrate from the person’s gut to just beneath the skin where they can grow up to three feet in length. A blister forms in the vicinity of the worm’s head and the toxins around it cause a severe itchy and burning rash, and other flu-like symptoms. Similarly, when the parasite lays eggs under the skin, large fiery blisters form and eventually break. If the blisters become infected, they can cause death.

“From ancient times physicians treated this infection by cutting a slit in the patient’s skin, just in front of the worm’s path. As the worm crawled out of the cut, the physician slowly and carefully wound the pest around a stick until the entire animal had been removed. It is believed that because this type of infection was so common, physicians advertised their services by displaying a sign with the worm on a stick.” (midrash-bounces@joinhands.com – David Martyn,

The cross of Jesus is a similar symbol. It has not always been “*the*” symbol for the Christian community. In fact there is emerging evidence that it wasn’t until the 8th Century that the cross came to be used as “*the*” symbol of the Christian story. Scholars studying Christian art of earlier centuries have discovered a *lack of crosses* and *an abundance of depictions of paradise*. This seems to be in keeping with Jesus’ emphasis on the coming of God’s realm here on earth.

However, it was the cross that prevailed as *the primary* Christian symbol for a number of reasons that I won’t get into this morning. Suffice to say that it has become our symbol of *God being with us and providing a way through the most grievous of life’s circumstances* – even unimaginable torture and death.

The cross has become *our symbol* of where *life meets death*. When we look at the cross we are confronted by two of our most *primary fears* – *abandonment and death*. From the cross Jesus cried out, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” moments before he drew his last breath.

Abandonment and death – all of our fears somehow stem from these two fears. The fear of “not having enough” which seems to be front and centre for a lot of people these days comes out of our fear for our own survival. As we witness the stock markets’ steady decline and its disastrous effects on our economy and people’s livelihoods, not to mention their life savings, we become anxious. We don’t know where the trough will be – the lowest point when things will start to turn upwards again.

In the words of our current Moderator, David Giuliano, “Canadians are hurting. Our global neighbours are reeling. The economic situation is the harbinger of discomfort for some and of catastrophic suffering for others.” He urges Canadians to work together to care for those most affected – here and around the world. (Press release, Feb.24, 2009)

Although there is hardship for many, others are not hurting – and therefore our fear seems *out of proportion* when we put it into the perspective of the Israelites wandering in the desert, trusting God to lead them to their next meal or to the next safe watering hole – one that was not contaminated with parasites. . . . This very challenge, by the way, still faces millions of people in the world today and on this “World Water Day” we are conscious of the plight of 1.1 billion people who have no access to safe (clean) water for drinking and basic sanitation.

For whatever reason, it seems that whether we have a little or a lot, all mortals struggle with fear. Even when our survival is not particularly threatened, we find things to be afraid of:

The Gospel of John says that as we look at the cross, the place where *life and death intersect*, as we face our worst fears and give our hearts to Jesus, *we will have life*. Whatever our deepest distress, God will respond with steadfast love, with an abiding love, an eternal love. *Our fears are not the final word*. When our human experience meets God's compassion, *it is love and life that triumph* - not fear or fault-finding or condemnation.

John says that God sent Jesus into the world not to condemn us but to save us. To understand the impact of that statement and how it might be lived out in our lives, think for a moment of how it might apply on an interpersonal level. For example, when we want people – adults or children - to know that we love them, we don't convey that message by condemning them. Condemnation, faultfinding, blaming, criticizing and shaming are *not* the acts of a loving individual *or a loving God*; and they do not convince anyone that they are loved. As a matter of fact, they do just the opposite – they convince people that they are unloved, unlovable and unlovely. The very best we can give others is *our love* - not our advice, and certainly not our judgment.

Our criticism, our fear, our negativity may be a *natural human response* to distress, but it is not one that will lead to healing and new life. It is a response that *takes us off the path* that we are on as Christians – a path that is both journey and destination. It is the path that leads from fear to love.

Our greatest hope for the future may be in *letting the light of God illuminate the dark corners of our fear*, so that we might be freed to love as God does – with a love that encompasses all people. As we move beyond our fears we can more fully embody the healing power of God's steadfast, never-ending love.

May God grant us that *eternal love* that leads to life for all. Amen