

God Hears Us When We Cry

March 10th, 2024

Let us pray, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, God who hears us, God who walks with us. Amen.

One of my favorite church services is the blessing of the animals. I like to get cat treats and dog cookies. You will have a really happy Golden Retriever who badly needs grooming but wants to sit on the pew. You'll have a cat that is furious, but for some reason their owner thinks a blessing will help them with their attitude problem. You'll see small dogs in clothing. If you're really lucky, you'll see a puppy or a kitten.

So, one day, I was in church blessing animals, and a large family who I loved very much was gathered at the back of the church. I was happy that they had brought their pets and would be participating in the service.

I had baptized most of the children at the church. One young woman in particular, I'll call her Sarah, was very beautiful and smart and we had baptized her in a special ceremony at the same time as we baptized her first baby and they were both wearing white. It was amazing.

Anyway, I was blessing animals. And once all the dogs and cats had received their treat and prayer, the family at the back made their way up to the front of the church. They had a small animal carrier. I was pleased - some variety for the worship service. A couple of the kids opened the carrier – and reached their little hands in, And pulled out a snake. That thing had an extraordinarily strong body and seemed to writhe out toward me in thin air while the kids held the tail.

I looked at it. And I seriously didn't know if I could bless it. I didn't know if I *should* bless it. We did not go over that in minister school. How to bless a snake.

In the garden of Eden God actually curses the snake. Right? Genesis three- God says to the serpent - cursed are you above all wild animals, upon your belly you shall go and eat dust all the days of your life. In today's story from numbers snakes are biting the children of Israel and killing them. And I just don't like snakes. That's probably because it says in Genesis that God will make the serpent enemies with the woman.

There I was in front of the whole church and this snake was slithering towards me and these children were looking at me with big sweet eyes...And they seemed to like the snake. And I try to be inclusive, so, I blessed the little snake right on top of its snaky little head.

In today's story from the Hebrew bible, the people are in the wilderness, and they are struggling to find enough food. And poisonous snakes crawl into their camp and bite the people and they begin to die. And they pray for God to take away the snakes. God tells Moses to put a bronze serpent on a staff so when people are bitten by the snakes, they can look at the bronze snake lifted up and they will live. God doesn't take away the

snakes. And the snakes don't stop biting people, **But the story is that God hears them crying - hears their prayers and offers them a path forward.**

The Gospel reading today from John, recalls this ancient story.

Jesus said, "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. 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.

This passage compares Jesus on the cross to the serpent on the staff – as a sign that God hears us, loves us, is with us in our experience and wants to guide us through, and give us life.

And these passages- especially John 3:16 are very famous and can be interpreted a number of ways. You know what they say – “There’s a lot of ways to look at a snake on a stick.”

For me, when I think about snakes, You know I always think about my beautiful vibrant Sarah, laughing as she and her sisters pulled the little garden snake out of its box in church. Sarah, mother of two healthy baby boys, baptized in water and Spirit, marked with the sign of the cross. *Marked as Christ's own child forever.*

A couple of years after the infamous snake blessing, I received a call that Sarah had died. When I got to the house, the whole family was crying. Grandmas and cousins and brothers and sisters, Sarah's mom. I had brought soup, but nobody could eat. They were crying. It is so terrible, that I still have a hard time accepting it.

This week, when I was called out to the hospital to say end-of-life prayers for an older person, I was reminded...just like Sarah, the person I would meet would also be a beloved child, someone's child, God's child. I was reminded that in one way or another, suffering comes to every family. We are mortal humans so that even if we love God, even if we are marked as Christ's own forever, We will all walk the difficult road. *Every family.*

In Numbers Chapter 11- before the snakes come into the camps, the bible says – *Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance of their tents.*

Every family was crying in their tent.

And Moses heard them.

Moses heard them.

In today's story, we don't have a God who takes away snakes. Sadly, for me, they still crawl the earth. We do not have a God who changes the natural flow and progression of life for humans in the natural world. *But we have a story about a God who hears us when we cry.* A God of compassion. A God who wants to provide a way through our difficulties.

In Jesus, we don't have a savior who kills our enemies or rids the world of leprosy, but we have a person who sees the suffering of the children of God, who does not look away - a person who sees disease, and sorrow, and who has compassion for those who have messed up their lives. In Jesus, we have someone who knows how it feels to be human, who knows how it feels to cry. Through Christ's compassion for us, and solidarity with us, there is life.

If you are here today to seek God, to look at Christ lifted up, to look for that deeper life that the bible is talking about, then part of that journey is to look and to listen to others, to see where God's children are crying, because that's where God will be.

If you've ever been in deep sorrow then you know that being heard and seen – is not nothing. It can help you move through the experience and live again. *This is what the outreach leaders in our church are giving us the opportunity to do.*

When Joel gets up to tell us about the Refugee family- It's not just about raising money- though that's part of it. He's giving us an opportunity to look, to see and to hear about the struggle of those who live in violence. He gives us an opportunity to allow compassion to flow into our hearts and compassion is love. And love comes from God. When we follow a God who hears every family crying in their tent then we *must* hear those crying in the refugee camps.

When Heather is filling boxes with socks, she is inviting us all to see and to hear the cries of our neighbors in Saskatoon who are cold and crying in their tents.

When we remember that suffering is not something to run away from but is a part of the human journey for every family. Then we can look and we don't need to be afraid.

When we look to the cross, we remember the suffering that Jesus went through. The cross is a way for God to ask us to look and to hear those who are suffering, to keep them in our hearts and prayers, in our decisions and in our community so that God's love and life may flow into the world. So that all our lives may be blessed.

And today, if you feel like crying- if you are sick, if you worry, if you have lost hope the scriptures remind us that *God can hear you. God can see you.* God loves you – it says - *God so loves the world.* You are not alone. You are a part of God's family. You are Christ's own child forever. And today, we have hope, because forever is longer than any human problem that exists.

And Easter is coming. Amen

Rev. Emily Carr