

Title: Grasping Life's Serpents

Text: Exodus 4:1-4 *MAT 12:10*

Proposition: To help people have a stronger faith!

Introduction

Hidden away in the story of Moses is this weird tale of a stick changing into a snake and back to a stick. It seems an incident of dubious significance; and yet, a second, deeper look will discover in it both a focus for our understanding of Moses and a parable for our time.

The highlights of Moses' story are familiar enough.

Give Highlights.

Ten Commandments

In midian, things go extremely well. Moses meets a beautiful girl, falls in love, marries, and takes a steady job with his faith-in-law. To all appearance, Moses has it made. Love- Marriage - Security.

But it is all an illusion. God and Moses' past keep after him. Out in the fields, as Jethro's shepherd, there is plenty of time to think. As he leans on his shepherd's stick, the memory of his people's slavery vividly before him, the contrast with his own placid existence forces a prayer: Would God some leader could arise to bring them relief, escape, freedom. In that very moment, a voice, ~~as if~~ the voice of God, says: "Come Moses, I will send you."

It's a challenge that comes home with almost physical violence. He starts back. *He starts obeying Moses* ~~The shepherd's stick falls to the ground.~~ And Moses freezes, staring at the stick as an overwhelming sense of personal responsibility possesses him.

Why not? He has the knowledge. He knows Egyptian politics. He has contacts, ability, and a profound sympathy for the Hebrew cause. Could he dare?

W

Then comes a counterflood of doubts, fears, and excuses. He is no orator to persuade an enemy king. Neither side will trust him - to the Hebrews, he is a privileged person; to the Egyptians, a traitor, a murderer, a wanted man. *Pharaoh List of 10 most wanted men.*

It is a critical moment for Moses. The issue cannot be avoided. All his procrastination, and all his suppressed concerns are suddenly brought to a great mental and emotional climax. Vainly he tries to thrust it all from his mind. ~~But his head is pounding, swimming.~~

Then, unbelievably, before his ~~staring~~ eyes, the shepherd's stick begins to move. It twists and writhes, and, in a panic fear, Moses turns to run from this wriggling serpent. ~~But~~ he is halted by the ^{Voice of} ~~sound~~ of ^{God} the ~~Voice~~: "Put out your hand, Moses, and take the serpent by the tail."

There is a trembling clam. Then, this ancient shepherd-prince stretches out his hand to take the writhing symbol of his doubts, fears excuses, and guilt. The pounding of his heart ceases as he takes it boldly and looks at it. But it is not a serpent. It is not even a stick. It is the rod of God. It is the symbol of his consecration to a high calling and a great task.

What ever the miracle in the stick, the greater miracle was in the man, where all God's mightiest miracles occur. Moses went out with a shepherd's stick, the symbol of an unfocused, undistinguished life. He came back with the rod of God, the symbol of a life that is filled with purpose, determination, and dedication.

And my friends, I believe the stick^s is still here. Whether you are thinking of Moses, or of your own personal life, the stick is part of the picture. It symbolizes all that is escapist and commonplace and spiritually uncreative. And I ^{would like to} ~~am suggesting~~ that perhaps, before ^{your} stick can become the rod of God, it must first become a serpent.

And then you must be willing to reach out your hand and pick it up

How often have we fling our sticks upon the ground, to have them become symbols of our rationalizations and indecisions, hissing at our doubts and fears, our moral hypocrisy and failure of nerve. How often we run, *we feel the urgency, to take the* because we suppose escape - to be freedom. Every day I talk with *out* young men who have feelings of doubts, failure of nerves, and uncertainties. And all we need to do is listen to the voice *of God* that says: "Put out your hand and take the serpent by the tail" and it shall become the rod of God.

BODY

I *I would like to suggest that*

The serpent is a symbol of Moses' doubts. He had lost confidence in himself and in God. And I believe many Christians are like Moses.

There is doubt about your own possibilities and about God's reality and power. There are those who challenge the authority and the meaning of Scripture and doctrine, and immobilize us before the question of life's meaning and purpose.

True, for many Christians, doubt is necessary - and good. For many of us, before our shepherd's stick can become the rod of God, it must become the serpent of doubt. Without doubt, faith is too often a mere hothouse plant that has never faced the light of day. "Rejoice," says ~~St.~~ James, "when you find yourselves in diverse temptations" - and he might well have included "diverse doubts"; for, as temptation is an opportunity of virtue, so doubt is the opportunity for faith to find growth and maturity *in the life of a Christian*

For many of us, there is no other way to a mature, triumphant faith than through our experience of doubt. To move, like Moses, toward the serpent of doubt, and to grasp it boldly by the tail, is itself an act of faith in which we discover that, in very truth, we hold the rod of God. Perhaps it is only the doubting, ~~wondering~~ the questing, questioning Christian, who can pray the strangely Christian prayer: "Lord, I believe help my unbelief." *So Serpent - Doubt*

II. The serpent is also a symbol of Moses' fears. Fear had sent him running from Egypt and now sets him to run from the reptile at his feet. And here, too, we are like Moses, for serpents of fear still surround us.

Our lives ^{are} is riddled with fears. We fear for our loved ones, for ourselves, for our future. We fear sickness, failure, social disapproval, loneliness, and death. We fear social conflict, and nuclear war. We have our superstitious worries and our personal snake pits of anxiety. In truth, as long as you possess imagination and live in a world of uncertainty, danger, and evil, fear will surely remain with you.

Fear is of two kinds: there is fear that paralyzes and that belongs to cowardice, ignorance, and prejudice; and there is fear that instructs, and that is essential to understanding, survival, courage, and achievements.

Fears that causes use to stand still are the problem. Excessive fears and worries are the ones that reduce our efficiency, increase our depression, distort our vision, and poison our very souls. And I believe we must learn to handle these in order to have a productive and meaningful life. And the only way to do this is to lay ^a whole of a faith that trust ^{Jesus} as the saviour who loves us and will never let us go.

The Bible is a record of those who have passed from problem-fear to a living faith. The Psalmist's confident joy is typical: "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

But the other kind of fear - that kind which is healthy, instructive, reverent, - remains. As Characterizing our approach to God, it is, says the Scripture, the very beginning of wisdom. ^{and Paul} ~~And even the New Testament man,~~ who is persuaded that nothing can separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus, works out his salvation with "fear and trembling."

"Perfect love casts out fear," the problem-fear that twists things out of shape, and keeps us from the love and power of God. It is the reverent, loving, faith-filled soul that wins a stable perspective and a steady vision. "Put forth your hand, and take the serpent by the tail, and it shall become the rod of God," for "God has not given unto us the spirit of fear, but of love and of power and of a sound mind."

3 A last meaning remains. The serpent is a symbol of Moses' moral failure, - his murder of a man, his cowardice, his hypocrisy. Again, Moses is everyone of us. For between us and God, as between Moses and God, there is a great barrier, a barrier of human ~~per~~^{per}versity and self-interest, that separates us from God's purity and holiness. Whenever we dare to face the moral realities of our lives, the contrast is there, in all its terrible, silent judgment.

The Bible is a record of the contrast between the ~~wickedness~~^{evil} and guilt of ~~men~~^{people} and the forgiving, restoring mercy of God. In Christ, God loves all ~~men~~^{people} with an equal love, but we find it hard to offer goodwill to any except those who love us, or those of our own kind. God is pure, but the imaginations of our hearts are too often dark and shameful.

God is merciful and compassionate, but we can be so cruel in word and deed. [For many of us, as we look afresh at ourselves in contrast to God, it is our sinfulness, the serpent of our guilt, that keeps us from God.]

But the simple truth is that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, to bring reconciliation where there is division. To bring acceptance where there is rejection, and to perform a miracle within the human heart where all of God's greatest miracles take place. Quietly, he turns our fallen faces upward so that we can look straight into the face of God and see for ourselves that he does, in truth and in mercy accept us.

In the New Testament, it is written: "and behold, there was a man with a withered hand... Then Jesus said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' And he stretched it out, and it was restored, whole like the other." *Dear Friend* This is his first word to us: a word of healing, and an invitation to come with our withered souls, our barren, defeated lives, and our doubting, broken faith. And in His word, there is the sound of another voice: Come, look fully into the face of your doubt and fear and guilt, "stretch out your hand and take the serpent by the tail," boldly, obediently, thankfully. And it shall become the rod of God.
