

A Road to Golgotha: Bowing to Snakes
Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 27
March 4, 2007

I am still enjoying my book by the Buddhist nun that Jill Kramer gave to me. Although the name of this book is When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times, I refer to it as my Buddha book. I like my Buddha book. It clarifies some of the things that I've never understood about meditation. It opens up a whole new channel of possibilities of how to see the world. Also, it amuses me from time to time. I don't say "amuse" as in a pejorative sense; I am not making fun of what I read. That said- her stories probably amuse me in ways that the author didn't intend. Here is one such story told by the author Pema Chodron:

I once attended a lecture about a man's spiritual experiences in India in the 1960s. He said he was determined to get rid of his negative emotions. He struggled against anger and lust; he struggled against laziness and pride. But mostly he wanted to get rid of his fear. His meditation teacher kept telling him to stop struggling, but he took that as just another way of explaining how to overcome his obstacles.

Finally the teacher sent him off to meditate in a tiny hut in the foothills. He shut the door and settled down to practice, and when it got dark he lit three small candles.

Around midnight he saw a very large snake. It looked to him like a king cobra. It was right in front of him, swaying. All night he stayed totally alert, keeping his eyes on the snake. He was so afraid that he couldn't move. There was just the snake and himself and fear.

Just before dawn the last candle went out, and he began to cry. He cried not in despair but from tenderness. He felt the longing of all the animals and people in this world; he knew their alienation and their struggle. All his meditation had been nothing but further separation and struggle. He accepted- really accepted wholeheartedly that he was angry and jealous, that he resisted and struggled, and that he was afraid. He accepted that he was also precious beyond measure- wise and foolish, rich and poor, and totally unfathomable. He felt so much gratitude that in the total darkness he stood up, walked toward the snake, and bowed. Then he fell sound asleep on the floor. When he awoke, the snake was gone. He never knew if it was his imagination or if it had really been there, and it didn't seem to matter. As he put it at the end of the lecture, that much intimacy with fear caused his dramas to collapse, and the world around him finally got through. (Pema Chodron, p. 3-4)

Every time I mention a snake in a sermon, Bob Garner always, and by always I mean every single time in Bob's stubborn, dogged, beloved way, Bob always tells me how the snake is a misunderstood creature whose environmental importance is essential. He never fails to mention how snakes are more afraid of humans than we are of them and how negative associations cause folks to kill snakes unnecessarily and that I shouldn't be promoting wanton snake killing from the pulpit. First of all, Bob, it's not my fault that snakes have a negative association. They bite people. Not my fault that they bite people. Secondly, there's that whole Genesis story. Not my fault. I didn't write it. Thirdly, I would never endorse the killing of any animal no matter how icky that animal is. A few years ago my father offered to kill a snake for me because snakes really creep me out, but it was a black snake and I refused, in spite of all of its creepiness, because of it's a harmless snake with many beneficial properties. See Bob? I am a great defender of snakes. I do not promote wanton snake killing in any of its forms. However much I am against snake killing, however much I am not responsible for the maligned reputation of snakes, however much I intellectually appreciate the snake's importance in the circle of life and their essential environmental contribution blah blah blah, snakes scare me. Really scare me. That's not my fault either. Blame educational television of the 1970s.

When I was a young child, every so often I would watch a children's special based on the short story by Rudyard Kipling. It was an animated special on Riki Tiki Tavi, the mongoose that dared to take on two King Cobras which are native to India where this story takes place. Oh my goodness! I loved that mongoose. Equally oh my goodness, those snakes terrified me. The worst scene for me was when the mother snake threatened to bite the boy of the household. When she threatened to bite him, she said "If

he moves, I strike. If he doesn't move, I strike." The mongoose wins, but it's a harrowing adventure.

I loved that mongoose, but those cobras stayed in my psyche. My absolute worst childhood nightmare stemmed from that show. I remember most of that dream as if it was yesterday. Snakes attacked my house, like they were coming through the windows and stuff. Mom turned on the kitchen sink and a snake came out of the faucet. The final scene in that dream featured me walking out the side of my childhood home onto my gravel driveway. Just when I thought I was safe, King Cobras jumped up around me. The snakes had been buried in the ground with just a little bit of their backs showing in the driveway; they had been masquerading as the gravel. In the dream when the snakes all rose up, I saw myself with my hair standing on its end. Then I had enough sense to wake up from this nightmare, but I was panicked and terrified. It is totally not my fault that I'm afraid of snakes. Bob, blame educational television.

Whether snakes or heights or public speaking or crime or bankruptcy or aging or raising children or the blank screen that stares you in the face when you need to begin a paper or a sermon, we all have fear. We all know fear. Some of it is trivial. Some of it is deep. Some of it is irrational. Some of it is logical. All of it is real. We all know fear. We've all experienced fear. Most of us run from it most of the time. We don't stare it down, we try to avoid it. We don't bow before it, we get out a hoe and try to lop its head off before it bites us.

I felt kinda rotten for three days this past week. When I finally got around to looking at this week's scripture on Wednesday, I groaned out loud. When I don't feel well, I lack the bounce in my step, the spring in my spirit, that joyful, energetic thing that's needed to prepare a sermon. My initial work on this passage occurred a few weeks ago when I was planning the Lenten events back in January. I knew that the Abraham text was coming up. I fully intended to speak on why God forged a covenant with Abraham. As soon as I read the text, I thought, that's so not where the call is this week. Then I thought "Maybe I should preach on that verse that God reckoned Abram's belief to righteousness." I love that sentence. I'm Southern. I love any sentence that uses the verb reckon. That sentence might speak to me, but it didn't work for me this week. I was feeling bad and Abram's insistent faith just annoyed me. I was like "God promised you a son three chapters ago. God promises you a son again in chapter eighteen. Isaac finally arrives, after a considerable amount of time, in chapter twenty-one. You're not normal. You're an annoying, exceptionally faithful person who believes in God's promise even when God dallies around for a very long time to fulfill it." When I was good and disgusted with Abraham and his staunch faith, then I looked to Luke, Jesus is mourning Jerusalem- too political. Then, to Paul, no Paul. (Paul doesn't often speak to me. Have you noticed?) Then Psalms, not that Psalm. It's lovely, but not so much working. So back to Abram, as he's called in this scripture. He becomes Abraham two chapters over and that's how I refer to him most of the time today. However, this time after reading the Psalm, I noticed the opening words of this chapter which I had previously neglected. When God appeared to Abraham in a vision, God reassured him "Do not be afraid. I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Abraham, the annoyingly faithful patriarch, felt fear. Abraham continued to believe in God's promises even when it took a long time (in human terms) for God to fulfill God's promise. That made an intersection for me, even through my malaise. Fear and faith. Abraham has fear, but he also has faith. Two things that seem mutually exclusive to some extent are really just two manifestations found on the same journey.

Most of us are not fearless because we're faithful. Most of us are fearful too much of the time. We often blame our lack of faith for the fear. We do the "if only" thing. "If only I were more faithful, I wouldn't be fearful." "If only I had his faith, I could get through this difficult thing." "If I only had her faith, then I wouldn't feel the way that I do. She has exceptional faith. That's why she's fearless." This "if only" thing doesn't work. Trust me. My therapist tells me that every week. The human condition, therefore, the condition of every believer is that we are simultaneously faithful and fearful. It's not an either/or thing. Like the man described in the Buddha book, faith and fear are both parts of the same journey. An increase in one doesn't eradicate the other. Sorry, folks, but life ain't that simple.

Simple it's not, but it's not impossible either. The Psalmist, in his depth of honesty, reminds us that the believer's path is the path of faith that engages the fear. They both exist within one person, but the faith sets the context for the dialogue.

**The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?**

**The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?**

**Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;**

**though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.**

**[Why no fear? Why confidence?]
[Because] God will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.**

Who is God? My light, my salvation, my stronghold, my shelter. God is the one to whom I turn when I'm afraid. God is the one who will not turn me away, even if my own parents turn me away.

The speaker, the Psalmist, hasn't conquered fear. This is apparent because the poem records the Psalmist's petition for protection.

**Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me.
Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries.**

I don't know about you, but that's similar to what I've heard myself say- either outloud while crying in the night or in the silent whispers of my heart. All of these things are present. The fear. The faith. The hope. The despair. But mostly the fear and the pain.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, fear and faith are part of the journey. We don't need to throw a good helping of guilt into this mix just because we experience fear. Good Christians experience fear, every single one of them. Exceptional Christians experience fear, every single one of them. The role of faith isn't to bludgeon ourselves because of how we feel or because of how we're unable to overcome fear. The role of faith is to contextualize the fear. "Yes, I feel fear. Fear is part of life. Fear is part of faith. Fear is an unavoidable part of the journey. Fearlessness isn't always a smart thing even if it's what we often want. Fear can be a good teacher." But most of all, faith should contextualize the fear so that faith, not fear, has the final word.

Peter L. Stinke is a church consultant with the Alban Institute and he wrote these words in a devotional found in the February 20th edition of the Christian Century:

When we are of a fearful heart, we forget the plot of the story. God is not only the author of all things, the God of Genesis, the Mother of all creation, the beginning Source but also the God of promise, of the things that will be, of new creation, of the future, of tomorrow. God is the Alpha and Omega.

Most times nowadays I am so hurt that I can't see straight. I am blessed to be surrounded in a place where God's story continues to pour itself out in front of all of us in evident and manifest ways. I am blessed to have good friends who are willing to tell me time and time again that I won't feel this bad forever and that God is the author of the things that will be, of blessings untold. I'm always been one for whom hope was much easier than faith. I've always been one for whom hope carried me when faith faltered. I'm at a place where hope can't carry me. The best that I can do, the best that is done for me and told to me and witnessed to me is that God writes the story. I don't write the story; God does. This chapter is not the final chapter. It's certainly not the only chapter. When we are of a fearful heart, we forget the plot of the story each and every time. Fear is a powerful emotion. It makes us deaf and blind. It makes us fight. It makes us flee. It makes us freeze. Sometimes we do all three within the same hour; fear is a powerful thing. But so is faith. Fear is a stronger emotion, but faith is a stronger and more determinative force. God is the author of the things that will be, of new creation, of the future, of tomorrow, of blessings yet to be written.

Eleanor Karas sent me a poem whose author is unknown. It reads:

**Child of My love, fear not the unknown morrow;
Dread not the new demand life makes of thee.
Thy ignorance thou knowest not is known to Me.**

**Thou canst not see today the hidden meaning
Of my command, but thou the light shall gain;
Walk on in faith, upon my promise leaning
And as thou goest all shall be made plain.**

**One step thou seest- then go forward boldly
One step is far enough for faith to see;
Take that, and thy next duty shall be told thee
For step by step thy Lord is leading thee.**

**Stand not in fear thy adversaries counting
Bare every peril, save to disobey
Thou shalt march on, all obstacles surmounting
For I, the Strong, will open up the way.**

**Wherefore, go gladly to the task assigned thee
Having My promise, needing nothing more
Than just to know, were'er the future find thee
In all thy journeying I go before.**

I don't know if I'll be bowing to any snakes in the near future, but I am comforted to know that fear and faith are both part of the journey. My fear, your fear, our fears don't get to write the plot. God does. That makes all the difference. Amen.