

SNAKE BITES

During Lent we have been talking about and pointing out signs.
Signs make a statement, just as our signature is a sign that makes a declaration.
The signs we use represent information we need to help us know more and to make better decisions.

Signs are usually helpful, but that depends on one's perception.

An RCMP officer who thought he had a perfect spot to catch speeders, didn't appreciate the signs he discovered.

The officer kept watching his radar aimed at cars driving by on the road that was notorious for speeders, but No body was speeding. Curious, he turned around, and drove up the road past the first turn, and saw a 12 year old boy holding a hand painted sign that read Radar Trap Ahead.

He smiled and decided to try again another day, so turn around and headed down the road only to discover the boy's friend about kilometre away. That boy was holding another sign and a bucket full of money. His sign read, "TIPS."

Signs can save us..... more than money,..... and signs can invite us to respond, too.

The John 4 passage presents an Old Testament image. In a way, it is a sign.
Verse 14: Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up....."

Some may think this "lifted up" refers to Jesus on the cross, but that is NOT the case at all. It is clear the reference is to the story in Numbers chapter 2—our Old Testament lesson.

In the Numbers passage, the situation is all too familiar: the Israelites are stuck in an old pattern—wandering about in the wilderness,... moaning and groaning about how terrible their lives are.

They are behaving like selfish, spoiled, immature children, complaining to God and Moses:
"Life is NO fun..... We're miserable.....
How much longer..... We want to go back to our old home.....
Hey,..... We're hungry.....we don't have any food,..... And..... we can't stand the food we have."

Apparently, they are picky eaters,..... and then they encounter a real threat: poisonous snakes.
People die.

Their primitive theology dictated that God controlled everything; therefore, they assumed God send the snakes to punish them.

Primitive theology demands simple answers; even so,..... if they really believed God controlled everything, then why were they so worried, and why would they dare rebel against God?

Nevertheless, they became keenly aware of the consequences from their series of bad choices and selfish thinking.

Bad habits and destructive behaviour will eventually feel like poisonous snake bites..... that kill.

God did intervene to save them, and told Moses to make a bronze snake and set it up on a pole. And, God said to Moses that those who look at it will live, and not die from their snake bites. The bites may keep happening, but they won't consume,... any longer.

In many ancient cultures, the snake symbolized healing,... as it does today, too, for the medical profession.

To be sure, the bronze snake wasn't magical. It didn't have healing powers. The magic was in following God's instructions of looking at the snake.

By looking up at the snake, they were not only making a radical departure from their former self centred, woe is me,..behaviour, but they were also believing / trusting in God,..... for a change.

The salvation was not the bronze snake. The salvation came from changing their way of thinking and behaving.

Likewise, salvation is not found by simply pronouncing Jesus' name or claiming Jesus to have magical powers.

*It is believing / investing self into God's way that saves.

Moreover, I find it most fascinating, and not coincidental that the Israelites had to face what was killing them.

They couldn't run and hide or even fight off the snakes,... but instead, they had to confront their fears / their enemy by ... out in the open, looking at a snake, and this was the path of changing their ways ... of their redemption.

Over and over again, they were stuck in the wilderness of self consumption / of base self centred thinking that produced bad and destructive results.

And, sooner or later the poisonous snakes will start biting, and they will kill.

Instead of listening to God / instead of believing and following God's way, they responded to another voice, and thus.... lived another way.

This internal struggle to make good, healthy and God inspired choices is nothing new. All of us know about this struggle.

Medieval Christianity liked to explain this conflict in terms of angels versus devils, thinking that people possessed within them both the angelic and the satanic.

We are familiar with this imagery. We've all seen cartoons and movies with a person wrestling to make a decision as their little devil is talking in one ear and their little angel is trying to persuade in the other ear.

And, it feels like that.

Paul didn't blame the struggle on the whispers from Satan. He rightly observed in Romans 7 that it was himself that was doing what he did not want to do. He called that base influence the "flesh."

Psychologists label it the Lizard brain or the reptilian brain.
Both labels refer to the same thing.

And coincidentally,.....snakes are reptiles.....???

Anyways, the Reptilian brain refers to the part of the brain that is at the bottom. It includes the brain stem and the cerebellum.

The reptilian brain controls the body's vital functions, such as heart rate, breathing, body temperature, etc., and it provides the very basic and primitive thoughts we have, including fear, fight or flight, tribal hierarchy, and base survival needs, such as hunger and comfort.

It is called reptilian brain because of how primitive it is. Many lower species, such as snakes, only have this part for a brain.

The reptilian brain is base thinking. It has rigid reactions, processing in yes or no / needed or rejected, and it tends to be compulsive – reacting to present stimulation and raw feelings.

Another section of the brain is the limbic system which is located in the centre. The limbic system has a number of parts, and it deals with emotions, emotional memory and value judgments. Our "gut" reaction or intuition comes from this part of the brain.

The Neocortex is the largest part of the human brain,.... and I fear, it is too often the least used. The neocortex includes the 2 hemispheres, and this is where the "higher" level of thinking happens. More complex and abstract thoughts are processed in the neocortex, and it is very flexible. It can change and learn new things / new ways.

Ideally, all three sections should work together.

The reptilian brain makes sure we eat, and not starve, and it tells us to run from big mean things with claws.

The limbic system instructs us to consider that big thing with claws is actually a dog, and dogs can be nice or enticed to be nice.

The neocortex assesses the whole situation, comes up with a plan B because that dog wants the cat you're holding.

There is a relatively high probability that Einstein was mostly listening to his neocortex,..... because he would forget that he was taking a bath,... and linger in the cold water until he became hypothermic.

However, usually the problem for most humans is that the reptilian brain is in control.

When the reptilian brain rules, fear prevails. Greed and the lust for power is a dominant focus, and addictive behaviour becomes a major problem. The reptilian thoughts are not sympathetic, nor do they process end results.

The reptilian brain wants to avoid pain. It demands instant gratification.

It doesn't assess or analyse. It doesn't care about long term consequences.

It wants those potato chips, NOW,... and lots of them.

It doesn't care about logic, scientific evidence or sound reasoning,... it wants to feel good NOW,.... in spite of the health hazards.

The reptilian brain is self centred, and in survival mode.

Anxiety comes from this part of our brain, too.

And the fascinating thing is, just like the little self styled devil whispering in our ear, we can hear the reptilian brain talk to us.... inside our head.

The reptilian brain wants to be in control, and so will persuade or scream to get its way.

It will try to tempt the limbic system or trick the neocortex, and if we empower it with our focus, then it will prevail.

It will use nostalgia, saying:

“remember how things used to be? Don't listen to what others are saying”
or.... I just want one more,.... for old times sake.

It will try anger, hostility and rebelliousness as a tool, and that sounds like:

“Forget those people. Who do they think they are trying to run my life.

“I have needs; I'm going to take care of myself first.”

Or..... life's short, I'm going have fun while it lasts.

Or,.... I don't care what others think. I've earned the right to enjoy myself / to indulge myself.

Or.... Hey,.... I've worked long enough in the church; let the younger people do the work, not me.”

Another tactic is Self Pity:

It's just so unfair that other people can have a good time, and I can't. So I'm going to make things fair.

Or.....Life has passed me by, so there is no point in *not* having a good time now. I've got no future.

I've got nothing left to lose.

Or..... there is no food,... and this food is terrible... I want the good stuff. I want to feel good NOW.

Self doubt and defeatism comes from the Reptilian brain... because it fears being embarrassed, and it will tell us to not even try.

Delusional self confidence is a ploy, too.

It tells us, “I won’t get addicted; I’m in control”..... or I’m smart enough to take care of myself,... I don’t need to trust others.”

And, there are many other sly persuasions the Reptilian brain will use through that little voice in our head, such as the petition to Pure pleasure, or haunting paranoia, or fear, or fatigueor the threat of pain.

We don’t want pain,.....not now.

The Reptilian brain demands to feel good now. It wants the unpleasant / undesirable to go away, **now**.

It cries out for medication to take the symptoms away,... and doesn’t care about healing.

We’ll pour tons of money into a cure for cancer, yet we don’t want to invest the energy at making our world and society wholesome and live giving.

The Reptilian brain wants a quick fix, and it thinks violence / militarism can instantly solve a problem that took years to make.

When we listen mostly to the Reptilian brain, and ignore our higher levels of thinking then we give our lives over to it to control.

Addictions and destructive choices are the results,.... all are venomous.

The world is too complex for humans to live as snakes.

And, another example of the Reptilian brain in control is when People want “cheap grace”,... or in other words a Saviour who will rescue them NOW.

Revivalistic theological calls a rescue mission salvation.... thinking that God will pluck us from our terrible place and plop us in a wonderful place,..... never considering in the higher level of thinking that if we don’t change..... then the location won’t make a difference.

And, as Jake pointed out last Sunday, the concept of blood atonement that was formulated a thousand years ago, is terribly flawed.

If all we need for salvation is Jesus to be the perfect unblemished sacrificial lamb, then why do we have all the details in the Gospels about Jesus’ example and message...as the way to live and be.

And, why are we called and invited to live that way.... to be as Jesus / to believe that Jesus is God’s gift for us.... so that we can live a different way, a third way?

The lesson from the Gospel of John invites us to think at a higher level.

It petitions us to engage our whole brain, especially our deeper, more complex thoughts.

Consider this:

God loves..... God does not think like a snake. God loves and gives.

God loves everything / the whole world, and God doesn’t want us to be poisoned / to be consumed by venomous snakes. God doesn’t want us to kill ourselves or creation, so God gave us a gift..... God’s example on how to live..... / how to be saved.

Do we believe enough to focus on this example / this way / on Jesus?

Can we turn from being consumed by the snakes at our heels and lift up our eyes to what God has for us?

Can we consider the lilies of the field, and not worry?
Can we truly believe that love is stronger than evil?

Dare we Contemplate on higher thoughts, such as loving our enemies, and turning the other cheek.
Our Reptilian brain says that is wishful thinking / that it doesn't work in real life.
Where are our thoughts? What are they focussed on?
Are we listening to snakes or to a higher level?
Do we believe we'll be okay if God tells us to give away all our possessions?

An eternal loving God can not be understood by the reptilian brain.

Jesus said come out and live in the light.... be exposed.
All the lies and deceptions from the Reptilian brain will be revealed as such..... when fully viewed in the light.
Healing / Salvation does not come in solitude or in secret.
We must confront and expose our snakes.

Can our thoughts transcend?
Can we overcome the power of the Reptilian brain?
Can we grasp such abstract concepts that include not having an answer right now,.... not knowing the conclusion / living with questions.
Can we handle the journey of following Christ?
Can we get through the day not knowing about tomorrow, and is that okay?
Can we rise about old tapes / old ways of thinking?
Can we deal with a world that doesn't make sense, and can we ... love?
Can we live with grace?

No doubt, there is more to our struggles than the strong voice coming from the base of our brain.

Sometimes other people have been that destructive voice.
We've been hurt and we've been told lies.
We've had pressure to conform and be something we are not.
We know pain and fear.

Moreover, I'm not discounting the influences of the demonic, and the gravity of our past mistakes and sins.

Even so, as Jesus declared:
God doesn't focus on such things,...as those snakes.
God loves us anyways, and gives us love / a way to find whole livinga way to overcome ... the destructive patterns.

Let us lift up our focus / Let us elevate our thoughts so we can believe in God's gift for us, and when we do,..... we'll discover the healing and saving power of God's Spirit that sustains us and inspires us to reach higher.

And,..... the sign that we are on the right track is well it's not a snake on a pole.
The sign / indicator that we are choosing well / that we are believing in Jesus..... is that we are learning to be patient.

Love is patient..... the life giving journey is Not about right now.
Patience..... we're in a long story that is still unfolding.

Patience is sign that we are being saved!

WAIT! Think about that.