

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
June 14, 2020 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Psalm 100
Matthew 10:5-16

Sermon: Peace and a Puzzle (Black Lives Matter)

See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

It's a commandment I find puzzling – but I think that was Jesus' intention.

I have never been afraid of snakes, never considered myself particularly phobic around them. When I was a kid, my brother inherited a stuffed boa constrictor from one of my grandparents. We drove with it in the camper all the way from Vancouver back home to Montreal. Perched on the pile of suitcases, it greeted us every time we opened the door, staring at us with a beady-eyed glare as if to say “Who dares to enter my serpent kingdom??!!” Unlike the garter snakes we encountered in fields and campgrounds, this one didn't run away, but tolerated the way we ran our hands backwards up his scales, and he didn't object when we made hissing sounds to send my youngest sister shrieking out of the trailer.

So, up until I started this sermon, I didn't think I had a problem with snakes. But then I was looking for a good green snake image for the powerpoint. Every snake photo – those real live snakes captured in full living colour – every snake gave me goosebumps and made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. It was something about seeing them in close-up, with their weird-pupiled eyes staring back at me. Yikes! I thought, no wonder the biblical writers used a snake as the tempter in the garden of Eden. It is not hard to believe they have an ulterior motive.

In the book of Genesis, the serpent leads Eve astray, who in turn leads Adam astray, by eating the forbidden fruit. The whole lot of them were ejected from the Garden, where they had once enjoyed God's company and favour. According to Genesis 3, God cursed the serpent, saying:

‘Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures;

*upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.*

This negative reputation for the serpent is not only in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. In Norse mythology, a great serpent is supposed to rise out of the seas to begin the battle between good and evil for control of the earth. In some Asian cultures, evil snakes guard the gates of the underworld, secretive and scary. And in Greek mythology Medusa and the Gorgons employed the snakes in their hair to turn humanity to stone.

Now, in contrast, I want you to think of the dove, and how it is portrayed throughout the Bible! In the primeval flood story, Noah tried three times to send out birds to look for dry land. Two ravens failed, and came back empty-beaked. Then the dove flew off and came back with a green branch – the dove was telling Noah that dry land had appeared and was apparently already vegetating. From then on, in the Bible and elsewhere, the dove became a universal symbol of hope and peace.

The dove also heralded God's own voice at Jesus' baptism, and is a common symbol of the Spirit descending on Jesus' disciples at Pentecost. In our own United Church crest, you can see the dove descending, representing our spirituality alive in the hopes of the church.

So why would Jesus pair that trouble-making, cunning serpent with a peaceful, inspiring dove?

As the gospel says Jesus told his followers that the world is sometimes an uncomfortable place for the people of God to be living out God's holy mission – "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves..." Therefore "be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves."

Throughout the gospels, we hear Jesus proclaim that God's kingdom or commonwealth, is either very near, or it's already in our midst. Jesus was clear, we are not choosing God **over** the world, God is already in the world. Our call as followers and disciples is to be living fully in both. So Jesus sent the first follower out – not just to survive in the world, but to flourish, and to be effective, and to be transformative in the world. To tip the balance in God's favour.

Other Bible translations give us a deeper appreciation for the traits of the dove and the serpent:

- "be as cunning as a snake and as inoffensive as a dove"
- "be as cautious as snakes and as gentle as doves,"
- Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves
- Be wary like snakes and like doves do nothing wrong."

Jesus had a real talent for creating puzzles that made his listeners think. The serpent was the tempter – the dove the symbol of peace. Pair them together and you get... well, you get... Jesus, you're confusing me again – you know I don't usually think this hard!

Of course, serpents are not actually bad, I know many people who keep them as beloved pets. And doves are not actually so pure – I know from a neighbour's experience, they can be very messy. But Jesus found something to celebrate about both species. The serpent's slippery speed is the ultimate in flexibility, an ability to shape and re-shape, to transform our agendas and our priorities. The dove's gentleness and its ability to detect new life even in the midst of a flood keeps us present and watchful, blessing the world with new life.

And that is what disciples are called to be. Not one or the other – not this over that, but taking the very best of both and becoming both flexible and present, both smart and spiritual, both sneaky and transformative.

In the life of the church there are already so many polarities that we try to balance. Are we missional or pastoral? Do we have leadership or management? Are we accessible or challenging? Are we traditional or creative? Are we lay or clergy led?

Meanwhile the world around us is becoming more and more polarized politically – and no one believes anything the other side is saying. Fact-checking and False News get more headlines than the facts of science and real life. As followers of Jesus, we often have to choose a side and stand firm in order to counter those extremes. While we are in the world, Jesus calls us to be conscientious about what we choose.

One of my favourite films is *The Mission* – it is the story of two religious men who are caught in a terrible situation in South America. The indigenous mission they have served is about to be invaded by Spanish soldiers, who will slaughter or enslave the people in the care of the parish.

One of them, a former soldier, he vows to physically defend the people to embody his faith and courage – he is willing to go to war to defend the vulnerable. The other, a priest and a man of peace, argues that violence is never the way of Christ.

At the end of film, we are left with a question: not which one was right, but which one am I? Where would I stand? What would my faith lead me to do?

We are all trying to be as wise as serpents, yet like the dove, to do nothing hurtful.

We need that discernment right now. The essence of the gospel tells that we are called to be anti-racist – to dismantle the racism which we find in our world, but also the racism we find in ourselves. We should embody the faith we proclaim: To will work in every aspect of life and ministry to dismantle anti-black racism. Each of us needs to discern how we will embody Christ's gospel truth: will we attend that March? Will we post that article? Will we confront that attitude? How can we use our gifts, or our situation to embody a gospel of both justice and grace?

It is a puzzle, because sometimes the answer is not the same for two people of the same faith, the same community, even the same household. Sometimes it takes a lot of listening to get the parts to fit together. To have the presence of a dove, and the wits of a serpent.

It makes life in community even more complicated. Christians are called to stand in protest, to speak out in solidarity and to be a public witness. But we also need to listen and be quiet so that other voices can be heard. We can only do this with God's help and holy Spirit.

In faith we choose a holy path. But God is with us, wherever we go. We live God's love and compassion always, with hope and discernment and prayer. Thanks be to God.