

# **Nourishing our Souls**

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Numbers 21:4-9  
John 3:14-21

During Lent the theme here at Hyattsville has been weaving. We have talked of weaving our lives together, the scripture into our lives, the challenges of the cross and how we examine the world. We have been together creating a visual symbol of our prayers.

This morning I want to attempt to weave together for you the lectionary texts that you have heard this morning- and are in many ways troubling for me, a workshop that I went to as part of an anti-racism project for school, and difficult conversations that lead to transformation.

So first a story- that you may have heard before:

There was once a group of people and they were looking for God. They had been in slavery and they were released, and at first they believed that their release was from God, but eventually their freedom became too overwhelming and they wanted again to be in a place that was familiar. And they couldn't believe that God would have freed them – because now they were in such an uncomfortable and unfamiliar position. Their new freedom was terrifying, there was constant movement, and they were always carrying their things, and going to a new place because they had a destination- and they needed to get to where they were going. And they felt scared, and they felt ill, and they were afraid that they were going to die. And they didn't want to die, because that would mean more unknowing, and difference and unknowing in life OR death, was too much.

And so they wished they could go back into slavery- and they cried out against God who did not save them from their pain, and instead entered into it with them. And they cried out against God who did not protect them from

the harshness of the world, who instead walked around in the desert with them.

And so God, not knowing what would satisfy these people who were afraid, sent again, as in the beginning a snake, who knew and represented wisdom and danger, and God hoped the people would remember the stories and the Garden, but the people forgot and were afraid and the snakes bit them and because the snakes had poison in them, the people died.

And again the people cried out in anguish and in pain because they were afraid, afraid of their freedom, afraid of the wilderness, and afraid of the unknown and the snakes which meant death.

And God recognizing the people's fear and their hopelessness did not take the snakes away, for they were part of the earth, and part of the world that had with great intention been created. So instead God asked that a snake be put on a pole. So the crafts men and women took bronze and carefully they replicated the serpent they were afraid of- and this snake was put upon the pole. And when the people were bit by one of the snakes with poison, they had only to look at the snake on the pole and they would live.

And it was not the snake on the pole that saved the people- it was their willingness to look at all they feared, to see their uncertainty, unknowing and take a risk.

Now some time later there was a man who lived in a certain time and place who knew and understood better than any one the heart and wisdom of God. And he also knew and understood better than anyone the heart and wisdom and fear of humanity. And he lived on the precipice as God and human and negotiated the chasm that at the same time is infinitely large and so small it is gone in the blink of an eye.

And he knew that people were still afraid of unknowing and change and difference , and so he talked to all kinds of people, and he looked at the fear of the leaders, who wanted only to obey God- but who turned their obedience into rules, and he said to them it is more important to see each other's pain

and heal it, than it is to follow the rules. And he said, we all are connected in ways that are stronger even than blood. We need to recognize this and move outside of our families. And he said, we need to reach across our pain and difference, and take risks to make each other whole. And he praised the woman who was bleeding-for she took a risk and made herself vulnerable, and made a connection and was healed.

And his words and actions inspired some and made others more afraid. And like the snake that was lifted up long ago, so the people could see their fears and face them, so was this man lifted up. So that all of humanity could see their connections to God and each other, so that they could see that they were not left alone in the world and would no longer need to be afraid of uncertainty and difference. That instead of fear, they could connect to each other and be drawn together- and live.

As we attempt to weave the text into our lives, I want to tell you about an opportunity I had this past week. I had an opportunity to attend a workshop entitled: nourishing our souls: developing authentic relationships across difference; which was for me as a snake lifted in the wilderness, an opportunity to bring together both the challenges and joys of living in relationship. In order to attend the workshop we had to go with someone across a difference: race, gender, sexual orientation, power position. And when we were there we had the opportunity to talk to each other about our power, about our oppression, and about the ways that our experiences in the world are truly different. It was in many ways a scary workshop- and I went with a close friend. We had been discussing also going with a colleague from the Army hospital where we both are doing an internship, it did not work out- and by way of confession I will tell you that at a number of points during the workshop, I was very glad that I it didn't work out- it would have been too risky, too vulnerable. Looking back, I know also it would have been a tremendous opportunity for growth, and a chance to make fully human a person that I am afraid of. \*\*\*

Joe talked last week about the ways we resist the foolishness of the cross, and often being in relationships across difference is also seen as foolish and fool hardy.

As an outsider from Hyattsville, who has had the opportunity to be inside for a time, I can't help but think about the challenge and the risks that Hyattsville has taken for the sake of relationship with Allegheny conference. And as this is a current source of congregational discussion, recognizing that I will not be here for the long haul, I would like to share – for this process, and for others that we may experience personally or professionally- some of the things that I learned from my workshop.

We were given 23 attributes of authentic relationships, and I would like to share with you some of them. When we become afraid we miss out on relationships, just as the people in the text today became afraid. In our fear we often pull out of relationships- which sometimes also is essential for survival. But I want to challenge us individually and as a congregation to look at our fear, at the snake on the pole, and make decisions not based on that fear, but rather based on our need to live in right relation with the divine and each other.

The first is that in order to be in an authentic relationship there has to be a willingness of both parties to maintain a relationship grounded in safety and healing. This might be the hardest part in the current discussion with Allegheny. The second is a willingness to be compassionate with myself and others. Knowing that I am no good if my existence is centered in guilt, shame or anger. A willingness to express and nurture humor, a willingness to hold both joy and pain in relationship, a willingness to remain in relationship, to stay at the table even when the conversations are painful, and a willingness to be comfortable with unfinished conversations. And finally a willingness to allow each other wholeness in spirit, the necessity of bringing everything that we are into the relationship- all the complications and vulnerabilities.

We can look at the loom as a concrete symbol, and a challenge of what we try to do here throughout the whole year. Taking our fears, pain and sadness, and our joys and celebrations, and in naming them and making them known, we shape it into something we can again look upon and see the challenge and gift of God.

When we are in such relationships- when we see each other's difference- really, our lives are changed and the world is both expanded and more deeply woven together.

My prayer for us individually and as a congregation is this morning.

For each of us: as a winter of hard conversations blossoms into new life,

As we with breathless, and repentant waiting, expect again the risen Christ,

May the Spirit of courage and risk taking that lives within Jesus, also live in us so that we may have the courage to enter relationships knowing that it was exactly these kinds of relationships and risk taking across difference, boundary breaking that got Jesus (and Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr., and Jean Donovan and Rachel Corrie, and Tom Fox killed). And that spirit may live in us so we may bring joy and connection to those we meet- as water falls on dry tea leaves and brings out their flavor- so may we.