

Playing with snakes

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Is. 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

From when I was three 'til I was eight, my family lived in Auburn, Alabama. We had a little suburban house with a nice yard that happened to have a creek running through it. It was a great place to play and explore, but creeks in the south include a less-than attractive resident: water moccasins.

We were taught to get out of the way should we happen to see one. I remember one particular day when all of the neighborhood kids were playing together down by the creek. Someone saw the tell-tale slither and yelled out the alarm. For the next half hour, there were kids running around the block yelling SNAKE!

We live in a world full of snakes. This week's news was full of them! I feel like living in the DC area means living next to a brood of vipers. It seems that every bit of news or intelligence can somehow be twisted into a pretext for war. Snakes!

Nothing seems to bring out the inner-snake like power. People with the best of intentions can get sucked in. So much of the activities of the powerful seem designed to preserve that power. I think of the "democracy preservation" actions in Pakistan recently. Snake!

In the midst of this, we Christians could have a lot to say! Instead, look at image of the body of Christ that makes the national news. If you believe TV, we are cranky old white men who pledge allegiance to the Republican Party and support the wars. We're crooked televangelists and intolerant nut-jobs. I look at these same Christians and think: Snakes!

And, oooh, when I read this passage in Matthew, there is good precedent for my name calling! John the Baptist, with full prophetic fury, unleashes on the snakes of his day. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Do you catch what he's saying here? He would rather that no one had warned them. He would have preferred that the snakes get caught in the fire rather than getting into his river. I guess he doesn't technically bar the snakes from baptism, but I wouldn't exactly call his a "welcoming" congregation.

Of course, there are times too when I might exhibit some small snake-like behavior. We are, you might say, all snakes who "fall short of the glory of God." I can be scaly when I get jealous. I hiss a bit when people step on my tail. But, I think I can honestly say that I've never swallowed anyone whole. Even though I

can be snaky, it just seems that there are some people in the world who embrace their snakes — sometimes without even knowing it.

It can be awfully dangerous to name someone a snake without having the full story. I admit that whenever I call customer service lines, I go in prepared with anti-venom. Sometimes the person on the other end of the line is delightfully helpful and patient. That always surprises me. Sometimes though, I get what I expect. I wonder if my expectations and the way I then present my questions really set the other person up to respond by striking back. At any rate, by the time we both hang up, we probably *both* feel like we were dealing with a snake.

There are a couple of perspectives we could take on the Matthew passage. I'm willing to entertain both, and I don't really know which is best. I'm used to the tradition that sees John the Baptist as a bold desert prophet, calling the people to repentance. He is a radical in that he is not chastising the Roman oppressors, but rather his own people. In fact, in the Luke account (which is nearly identical to that in Matthew) John calls the entire crowd a brood of vipers, not just the religious leaders.

In Luke, he also follows up the condemning speech with good advice on how to not be snakish. He encourages economic sharing. He tells tax collectors to not collect extra money. Soldiers even came to him, and he told them to not abuse their position of power. This allows me a positive view of John.

Sometimes a prophet just has to call a snake a snake. There are people and institutions that stand in the way of God's kingdom. John the Baptist had a vision of what the kingdom would be and saw where it was being inhibited. He was like Arturo Toscanini, who scolded an orchestra by saying, "God tells me how the music should sound, but you stand in the way!"

On the other hand, I wonder if John missed an opportunity. People do not generally respond well to being called vipers. Some of my beliefs have gotten me labeled as naive or even heretical. There are few better ways to get me to stop listening than to call me names. John was, after all, preparing the way for the one who would tell us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. John wasn't being very loving.

So if we're going to call a snake a snake but we still want to love that very snake, what do we do? How do we live as Christians right next to a brood of vipers? How does Hyattsville deal with Capital Hill? How do we respond to religious authorities that just don't get us?

Conveniently, one of our other lectionary passages for this morning deals with snakes. In fact, it presents an entirely different response than what we see from John the Baptist.

In Isaiah, we get a brief and poetic image of what the world will become as it turns. These are images to cherish. They are what we work toward. The wolf and the lamb—the leopard and kid. The calf, the lion and the fatling. And a little child leads them.

The cow and the bear graze together. The calf and the cub lie down with each other. And on this holy mountain, in this world as God intends it, “The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adders den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

We are called to play with the snakes! Like a child, we can dance our dance and sing our songs beside the brood of vipers. Nothing is more confusing to a nest of snakes than joyful play.

Playing can be as easy, sometimes, as simply doing what we do and not worrying about the consequences. Here at Hyattsville we play with people that some religious authorities tell us not to play with. We will keep on playing.

I love the idea of the annual hymn sing for peace. How bewildering that sound must be to those in power. Keep on singing!

Some of you work in government, and see your work as an act of Kingdom building service. Sometimes you might feel like you are playing in the snake den. Keep on playing.

I wonder if we put too much emphasis on the snakes themselves and not enough on the dens and broods. Isn't it really the institutions and power structures of the world that shape people? Some institutions treat us like play-dough, rolling us out into a limp, limb-less snake.

In a recent blog posted on themennonite.com, Tim Nafziger writes about his friend Gus. Tim describes Gus as type who “does not feel the compulsion to work out every intellectual angle of his stance before acting.” Gus was at this year's School of the Americas protest at Fort Benning, Georgia. When he prayed about whether he should cross the line and step onto base property, risking arrest, Gus says that he heard God say “Do it!” And that was enough. Gus was arrested along with ten other protesters, and processed by military police.

Gus told Tim that “the experience reminded him that these people were not his enemies.” He said that “The soldiers were very friendly and cordial, if slightly bored.” They were “just a bunch of people doing what they were told to do.” Gus cites Ephesians 6:12, where we read that “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces in the

heavenly places.” In Gus’ case, this meant that the individual soldiers were not his enemy — but perhaps the institutions that they served were. It wasn’t really the individual snakes that were the problem, but the brood.

If the halls of power and the dens of adders can form a person by compressing them and squeezing them, I think the church should have the opposite effect. We can offer freedom. We can offer joy and delight.

Christ is coming, and the world is turning. I long for the day when we can play without being bitten. That’s the reality of snake dens, however. Sometimes the snakes strike. That’s the messy thing about this already-but-not-yet time we live in. We know the kingdom of God. We live it. We sing it and dance it and play it. Yes, there is danger. But if we stop singing, then who will learn to sing along? If we stop dancing, who will join in our steps? If we stop playing, who will see our joy? Who will want to play with us? The world is about to turn. Let us show it the way.