

# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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## TALKING WITH SNAKES

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Text of a Sermon preached on the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

June 6, 2021

GENESIS 6:8-15 | PSALM 130

2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-5:1 | MARK 3:20-35

When we turn two years old, something turns a corner in us, and shows up. We start kicking, punching and biting. It turns out, these days, people with pencils and spreadsheets have come alongside moms and dads and have looked into this. They were surprised at what they found.

As a species, we do not just gradually start kicking, punching and biting each other. We go, as it were, from zero to sixty. We just start lashing out. We discover the novelty of getting a reaction, causing another pain even, and on average, we kick, punch and bite most frequently, right at the start, between ages two to three. The only reason it decreases is that our caretakers teach us to regulate our emotions and give us consequences.

Or they don't.

It is said "curiosity killed the cat." The story of our first disobedience is the story of our first awareness. I love reading Genesis with young people because every time it is like turning a corner and coming upon a crime scene. There is so much to observe. Here is the evidence. What do we make of it? Who are we? Where do we come from? Really?

What age were you when you asked yourself if what you were doing, what someone else was doing, was right or wrong? At that moment, you ate from that same tree that our sister Eve took note of in the garden of Paradise. Just before that instant, we were naked and unashamed, and could eat of every fruit of the garden, enjoy every experience without consequence. Apparently, this did not last very long.

We can see with our own eyes when we observe our children, this period of innocence lasts, perhaps, about a year. Then they, we, start to kick, punch, bite and use our voices for both good and ill. And each generation starts that conversation with the talking snake.

We debate over how we can reform the police, reduce violent crime. It turns out we study crime against persons and crimes against things. They are different things. They go in different directions. When violent crime goes up, property crimes go down. And vice versa. The most helpful conversations end up looking like a parent dealing with a two year old. How do we create systems that help us reduce and redirect violence and violent situations without throwing everyone in jail?

It is hard to see at first, but the biblical story has a deep structure, an ancient logic. The seeds of the answer come in God's reaction to Eve's curiosity and Adam's negligence. It turns out, we must study the curse, to see through to the blessing.

True, the story says we are cursed by the pain of bearing children, the struggle of working by the sweat of our brow, the desire for different things, to be at cross purposes. But the snake was cursed first! Evil raised its head, but it will not win.

The glimmer of hope here comes from God's first reaction. Like the parent who tries to come to terms with his innocent little one year old turning into a terrible two year old, God turns first to the snake. You talking snake, you are cursed to be trapped in your trickery. You will not win. Humans will take you out, strike you down, go for your head. It will cost them every time. You shall strike their heel. But if they teach their children the ways of wisdom and peace, they will eventually stop kicking, punching and biting one another. In the curses are the seeds of the blessing.

What we will need, of course, as a species, is a true teacher. One who is not afraid of looking into the depths of things, and facing the demons that torment us. We will need that man for others, that will come along, and undo the curses. One born of a woman, at the right time, forty-two generations from Adam, who will lift the burden of a law that has ceased to be a path to healing and freedom.

One who will bind the strong and violent man of our human nature so that we may participate in the divine nature of mercy, forgiveness and restoration.

It turns out, as we learn in the gospel this morning, that taking the time to discern good from evil, and better yet, doing such good things as healing on the Sabbath and casting out demons, can get you accused of being crazy. Better crazy than cursed. Better crazy than lost.

Better crazy than someone who does not call out those who kick, punch and bite their way to power, to exploiting and harming others.

It turns out, that while we learn as we go, as we gain more experience and hope to get wise, the one thing we cannot do is confuse good and evil, is call that which is good, evil, and that which is evil, good. That is the sin against the Holy Spirit. That is the most important thing as we carry through Eve's curiosity and discern whether this Jesus is our brother, and whether we want to be part of his family.

Jesus told us clearly, those who do my father's will, are my family, my mother, my brother and my sister. He claims Eve in this story. He lets us know that the most important thing is to continue smashing the head of the snake, even though it will bruise our heal, even though it is so often frustrating and difficult.

You know, we can reduce the violence around us. We do not have to give into cynicism. We can reform the police, train communities of elders and young people to diffuse violence before it escalates. We can stop blaming each other senselessly and speak plainly, even to those talking snakes. What matters is doing God's will.

What matters is that Jesus came to bind the strong man, and invites us to come alongside and do our part disarm the power of evil in our lives. By God's grace. With his help. We face our shame, our fault, our guilt, and do God's will.

Let us pray: Jesus, our brother, drive out the unclean spirits within us, and fill us with the Holy Spirit, that we may listen, and see, and act, to do God's will, and so be brothers and sisters to one another and to you. Amen.