

“Ophidiophobia”
Sermon for 3 March 2019
Text: Genesis 3:1-15

Now there’s a word that takes some working on . . . it means an abnormal fear of snakes and this is to be distinguished from both an irrational fear of snakes (*phobia*) and an unnatural fear of snakes (suggesting that we might be friends with snakes if we had not been educated into fearing them). Now the careful reader will note that the word used in Genesis is **enmity** (not fear, not hatred, not dread). Enmity describes the hostility between Eve’s seed and the serpent’s seed. The enmity is God-ordained. Ophidiophobia—a fine Latinate word. We are justified in hating, not fearing snakes—we are natural enemies. Jesus is coming to free us from Satan’s snare that’s the gospel in Genesis 3.

It really doesn’t take long to get into the weeds, a habitat of snakes and bunches of other critters, so to speak, when we venture into the biblical account of the fall. And, I add tongue in cheek, that those weeds suggest that the serpent came into Eden (the weedless paradise) from the weedy, wild wood outside the garden fence—the Hebrew for *garden* denotes an enclosed space! *And because evil came from an exterior source, evil itself must naturally be expellable!* The Fall, a real event in real time, is described in terms of natural symbolism within a naturalistic narrative. It would be a “nature tale” genre, or literary idiom, in which a natural assault occurs through natural means. Therefore a snake tempts Eve, a woman, to eat some poisonous fruit which she shares with her husband and “this meal” ends up enervating the whole human race, say, with moral paralysis leading physiologically to natural death! The snake is as a natural symbol of a natural enemy as one could devise. Besides, we have been around each other from the beginning, meaning a long, long time the tale holds together. I can not take credit for this insight. While I was a graduate student at the Institute of Social Anthropology, I had professional conversations with Mary Douglas, anthropologist and author of Purity and Danger (1966) and Natural Symbols: Explorations in cCosmology (1970). The year her second book was published, she was a guest of Prof. Evans-Pritchard and we discussed her work.

So, we and snakes were made natural enemies by divine edict. The world has a rather different take on ophidiophobia. While those conversations with Mary Douglas were intellectually profitable, I cannot bring myself to elevate the views of certain paleo-psychologists and evolutionary biologists, such as those expressed by two academics at the University of Virginia, Vanessa LoBue and Judy DeLoache, to the same level of discourse. Take as an instance this: “The idea is that throughout evolutionary history, humans that learned quickly to fear snakes would have been at an advantage to survive and reproduce,” said Vanessa LoBue. Judy DeLoache, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia in one of Vanessa’s collaborators; but I am not sure they being psychologists rank as bio-evolutionist experts. DeLoache opines: “Humans who detected the presence of snakes very quickly would have been more likely to pass on their genes.” . . . “It would have to be something widespread, that you could encounter on a day-to-day basis,” she says. “That’s why you don’t see lion and tiger and bear phobias as often. It would also have to be something that was around and dangerous while humans were evolving. Things that are dangerous right now, like guns, we haven’t had enough time to develop a predisposition to detect really quickly.”

Now, first, this “very quickly” business contradicts one of the central tenets of evolutionist theory: gradual change (adaptation) over vast periods of time. Secondly, this sounds very like

“survival of the timid,” rather than the survival of the fittest. So which is it, “very quickly” or “long and gradual?” Another dilemma is, among others, we simply don’t know (it has not been tested and observed) if learned data can be genetically imprinted so as to be stored in the DNA and transmitted through one’s genes. We don’t know “if,” and we don’t know “how.” And gun control?! We certainly don’t know how “gun control” would evolve¹. The presumption that guns are dangerous is more political/cultural than behavioral anyway. And finally, even if we evolved from primates (a hypothesis I reject), would studies of three-year olds and adults in a twenty-first century laboratory setting replicate the supposed conditions of primate evolution adequately enough to warrant a claim of scientific truth. For me, that is a bridge too far.

Returning to the natural narrative of Gen. 3, we left off with the divinely ordained enmity between Eve’s offspring and the serpent’s offspring—it entails a judgment of God on the being through whom sin entered the world. The insinuating slyness of the attack is specifically indicted, which despite the mist of sophistication still asserts either 1. that there no harm in disobedience, rebellion and sin or 2. that “spiritual death” is of no consequence. Both of which are downright lies. In this light Eve was the first victim of the first crime. Through the ignorance of innocence, *like a toddler who has to be taught not to touch the hot stove*, she was beguiled into rebellion; she was thrust into the bitterness of knowledge experientially (not abstractly, or theoretically). Here is what I mean by that: in the first instance, doing the will of God is experienced as the good. Conversely, not doing the will of God is evil. Disobeying God is an act of such world-altering magnitude that it provokes both immediate divine judgment. It also launches the intervention of God’s own Son to come, and in a costly manner, spring the trap, or loose the snare in which Satan had set for Eve—and through her all of us. Obedience is to us what air is to an albatross, or water is to a whale—or the fish and sea creatures. So divine dependency and submission to his will are the original life lines to our created being, our humanity. True freedom is lived out within the bounds of lawfulness—a fenced garden. Satan’s lie is that we can only be free when we deny both dependence and obedience. Simultaneously the necessity of conscience was quickened within her and she was left ruined, with a sense of guilt (deserved) and shame (the desired destructive result). Satan wanted to hurt God, his frontal assault having failed massively, so he attacked God’s special relationship to man. All this was simultaneous collateral damage and a great wrong was perpetrated which cried out to be rectified.

How could Satan pull off such deception. Perhaps if we could hear the sneering, mocking, jeering and scoffing tone when he said, **Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’** We might perhaps lay some of his persuasiveness to rhetorical skill. If Satan insinuated that God was a kill-joy, or was ungenerous and way too picky and restrictive in his manner of speech, the beguiling becomes more credible.

Sin tainted the communion between God and man instantly, weakening their spiritual bonds. Maritime investigation of the wreck of the Titanic yielded some striking results. It was determined that impurities in the steel and rivets that held the Titanic’s hull together caused the metal to be brittle—and the cold Atlantic seawater magnified this flaw in production. The vessel sailed under the illusion of being unsinkable. The tainted steel and compromised rivets spelled disaster prior to the collision with the iceberg. With better quality control, the ship might well have survived the collision, the water tight compartments might have held and many of the

¹ This represents a paradigm shift. We have leapt from bio-evolutionary science, to political science without qualification of key assumptions, or clarification of the terminologies.

1,500 lives lost might have been spared. The ship was actually vulnerable, hurt-able; not “unsinkable” at all.

Sin initiated a flight from God. Adam and Eve believed they needed to hide from God. They took to the bushes. *You can run but you can't hide!* Another common alternate strategy is equally futile. People strive to deal with their guilt by ridding themselves of thoughts, or ideas about God at all.² No God no guilt; no God, and I can do as I please. But the fly in the ointment is that denial does not get rid of God and because God is a supremely moral being, the universe is originally infused with moral truth, natural goodness. Consequences are inescapable. Judgment is inevitable. Denial may lead to debunking of, and to denunciation of God but destruction, defeat and death await all who take that path.

God becomes our interrogator, and our investigator—he sadly becomes our questioner rather than our answerer, our counselor and friend. That is a majorly discomforting shift of relationship. No wonder our first parents ran and hid! However, it is precisely at this point that a shaft of light, a ray of hope appears. True there will be enmity between the serpent and the woman but beyond that enmity comes the promise of rectification, the good news that the woman's seed **will bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel**. There will be pay day some day. God has ordained the subjugation and final defeat of evil; he has purposed the restoration of fellowship with him! That defeat/restoration is what we call to mind every time we gather at this table! And sin which caused a fracture is reduced by his grace to the level of a disruption—a moral catastrophe with a happy ending, a blessed ending. Yes, Jesus saves, Jesus rescues. By his redemption we are restored to that place where dependency is real and obedience is fully possible.

Yes, we may have ophidiophobia for a season, but even it will not be forever. We may be in bondage to sin for some time, but Christ will come and defeat sin and death and set us free.

Amen

² This is a moralistically driven form of atheism and it is hugely more prevalent than most would think.