

## Sermon Archive 475

Sunday 10 March, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: Number 21: 4-9

Ephesians 2: 1-10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



"Covenant wobbles". The wobbles I have in mind are motorcycle inspired. At certain high speeds, so I understand (I have never operated a motorcycle at high speeds - except possibly for once out on the Middlemarch Straights), a nicely balanced bike can just begin to move a little to the left, requiring slight correction to the right, over compensated back to the left (it's weaving now - is it wobbling?) If not properly handled (maybe by an easing back on the throttle, certainly not a quick jabbing of the brakes), the bike gets into an ever-more-rapid weaving that soon has "bike and rider" sliding across the road and at the mercy of any solid object against which they might hurtle themselves. As soon as the wobbles set in, you want to reduce them. But *is* that a wobble? Or just a bump? Is this speed unnecessary? Why are we going this fast? Ease back, just ease back. Pull over; take a breath. Kick down the side stand, and get off the bike - until you get back on, **safely** to take yourself home.

-ooOoo-

Here's the thing. As a community, we'd been encouraged to see ourselves as a covenant people. And from the start, part of the whole idea of covenant was that God would take us safely home. God promised as much. And indeed, we know that "covenant" is more than "contract" - that even if we fail to honour our part of the "treaty", God still will hold us, and keep us close. Hard to believe? Years later, exploring whether it possibly could be true, Paul will ask "shall we sin, so that grace may abound", and it's a provocative question. He's floating an absurd idea to flush out from the room any "wrong spirit" with respect to the matter of being loved. If we know we are loved, do we see that as an excuse to be less than we can be for the One who loves us? Of course not. We would want to be better. To choose to be worse, or want to be worse, or to allow ourselves to slide into "worse", would be to show no understanding of love at all. (More about that next week.)

But anyway, the thing is that the covenant people kind of sped out of Egypt - like some crazy pace along a Middlemarch Straight (wobbles are always possible). They hadn't greatly thought about it. They hadn't planned further than painting the lintels and cleaning out the kitchen. When the time came for leaving, they just left - it was all so fast (like a Middlemarch Strait). Who are we? Haven't had time to ponder. What do we need for the journey? Learning that as we go. Where are we going? Not sure yet. It's all been rather too fast. And now, pretty much before we know it, we've come to this certain bend in the road, nowhere important. Having kicked down the side stand, got off the ride, we find ourselves beset by a slither of snakes. First they frighten us. Second they bite us. Third, we die (not by motorcycle accident, but by wounds in the wilderness).

We didn't make the snakes. There's no obvious reason for them being there (other than that snakes are everywhere, including in our creation stories, where it's promised they'll bite our mother's heels and our heels will crush their heads - a promised conflict, one might say). But we feel kind of affronted when they arrive in our camp. We speak out against God, and against Moses. "Why have you (you two - you and your God) brought us out here to die? How does that make sense - all this way just to die! There's no food, no water; now there are snakes.

Feeding the people's complaint will be fear. It's scary when you're in the middle of nowhere. It's scary when people you love are dying. It's also scary though, even though you have no firmly formed sense of "what's happening and why", that the only confidence you had (that God had made a covenant with you, loved you, and wanted only well for you) has lost its sense of being true. And when you seem abandoned, any sense of God loving you becomes harder to believe. So I feel a bit sorry for the covenant people. Where is our God? What of God's promise? Covenant wobbles.

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One of the big religious questions over the centuries has been "why do bad things happen to good people?" The children who get cancer. The much loved partner killed by the drunk and speeding teenager in the stolen car at the intersection in Fendalton. The bassoon player deaf to the sound of the train horn. When the snakes arrive and kill us, it's increasingly hard to speak in naive ways of the God who loves and protects - and isn't protection part of what's promised in **covenant**? The rainbow says I won't obliterate the world. The stars say you can hope against hope. The commandments say we can live a practical covenant life. But rainbows dissipate. Stars are hidden by clouds. Commandments bring more shame than joy. And now the snakes arrive, it really feels like covenant is failing.

Covenant wobbles: if God's not keeping the covenant, then what's the point?

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The covenant people share some of this with Moses. And in their defence, they do acknowledge in a good old "we have sinned again you in thought, word and deed" way, that maybe God isn't **completely** to be blamed for the snake invasion. If the covenant is failing, in all conscience, they can see their **own** part in not having nurtured it.

God responds to the people's confession by telling Moses to make an image of the snakes, to lift it up on a pole, and let the dying people see it. You are dying; behold this image of that by which you are dying - and be made alive. It makes no sense, of course - to see an image of that which makes you dead, to see it lifted up, as if sacrificed (or removed from the ground, from the world in which it has bitten you), and mysteriously then to live. No sense. No sense at all.

But, soon, after looking at the image, the people are inclined to feel that the covenant that had died by God's abandonment of it, are covenant people again. The snakes somehow now have ceased to be a problem. God's provision of a sign makes the covenant itself make sense again. The sign doesn't make sense, but the covenant does again. Maybe that's a Lenten mystery . . .

There ends my critique of the First Testament covenant story.

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In latter days, Paul speaks of another occasion where the people felt like they had died - well, their hope had died anyway. Their world had long ceased to be an experience of love pledged, grace received, life nurtured. For them, says Paul, all had become like stuff blown about in the air, troubled, disobedient, unsatisfiable desire - wrath and un-centring weirdness. "You were dead" he says to them, to whom he writes.

"BUT" says Paul, "in great love and mercy, God did something equally as unlikely to fix the situation as a snake on a pole - a person on a cross. Those who looked upon him, who let his being lifted up speak to them, find themselves not dead, but alive. Paul says to them "this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God". Which I guess is his way of saying to those who think that the covenant is failing because God has opted out, that they are wrong. The restoring of covenant favour (even if it doesn't mean daffodils and lambs, bunnies and sunshine - but to weird visions

of someone lifted up on a pole) is given by God. It is God providing a strange way around the covenant wobbles that covenant is fatally fragile.

I wonder if that made any sense to the people to whom Paul wrote. Not much, I imagine. I wonder how the Exodus people felt when told to look at the snake on the pole. Not entirely happy, I would think - until it made them well. Indeed, I wonder (equally) how you have felt about me confronting you with various images this morning of people on crosses. Not entirely happy, either, I would think. Some of them are particularly unpleasant to see - and I'm not sure how we think they're meant to work. Is this us confronting the reality of what kills us? Is it us being encouraged to pray "never again"? Is it meant to haunt us until we change? Is it some weird kind of sacrifice that only makes sense in Jewish atonement practice? Or is it us being transformed as we keep his plea "remember me"?

Indeed, as we approach Holy Week, when THE man will be lifted up on a cross, when we might read him as a sign that the fragile but strong covenant finally has failed, maybe we will cast our minds back to today - when we were asked to consider Paul's claim that somehow such a vision might transform a "people dead" to a "people alive".

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We left Egypt very quickly. Who are we? Haven't had time to ponder. What do we need for the journey? Learning that as we go. Where are we going? Not sure yet. It's all been rather too fast. But *is* this a deadly wobble? Or just a bump? Is this speed unnecessary? Why are we going this fast? Ease back, just ease back. Pull over; take a breath. Kick down the side stand, and get off the bike - Take a look at that figure on the cross - until we're ready to get back on, ***safely in strange covenant faithfulness*** to be taken home.

A moment of quiet.

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