

Sermon – Sunday, December 4, 2022

Rev. Randi

I don't like snakes. I expect I am not alone. I try to avoid coming in contact with snakes, and I certainly wouldn't let my child – or any child – play with snakes. I have trouble imagining a scene in which children play with snakes, and their parents all sit around drinking coffee and chatting as they watch their children play.

“Oh, look at Billy with that cute black snake. Don't they play well together?”

“Yes, and see my little Iris tickling King Cobra on his belly. Isn't that cute?”

When I was a child, I frequently visited my uncle's cottage in Deltaville, Virginia, on the Rappahannock River. For you trivia buffs, the Rappahannock River is the longest free-flowing river in the eastern United States. It flows almost 200 miles from Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains and empties into the Chesapeake Bay at a point very near my uncle's cottage.

A small, shallow creek flowed into the Rappahannock on my uncle's beach. One day my cousin and I were playing in that creek. The creek had eels, and my cousin and I had fun scooping out the eels and putting them in the beach buckets we'd filled with water. My mother and my aunt watched from their chairs a few feet away.

I scooped a little creature from the creek with my shovel and noticed he was sticking his tongue out at me. So, I stuck my tongue out, too, only to have my mother suddenly appear and make us stop playing in the creek. I found out sometime later that the creature that stuck his tongue out at me wasn't an eel, as I'd thought. Instead, it was a small snake. I doubt the snake was poisonous, but my mother wasn't taking any chances.

It is quite a stretch to have children play with snakes, and their moms be OK with that. Something earth-shaking would have to happen to cause snakes to override their instincts to harm people.

I pondered the vision of a Peaceable Kingdom portrayed in Isaiah and spent some time this week looking at the many paintings the Quaker artist Edward Hicks did of the event. Hicks painted 62 pictures of the Peaceable Kingdom, at least some of them during a time when the Quakers were having a rift. The images and the peace they suggested the Messiah brings comforted Hicks during the division.

Hicks portrays the Peaceable Kingdom as a literal event that will occur at the coming of the Messiah. He also illustrates it as occurring, at least partially, with the signing of treaties with American Indian tribes.

A literal Peaceable Kingdom when predators lie down peacefully with their prey may occur at the Second Coming. If so, that would be a return to the Garden of Eden.

However, I believe we are to interpret this as a metaphor in our time. What figurative snakes have coiled up and hidden in our lives? What has hurt us so deeply that we

can't bear to think about it? What do we keep hidden in our hearts that keeps sticking its tongue out from time to time, threatening to bite us? What lions have ravaged our lives and left pieces for us to pick up? Is there a part of our life or personality with fangs that hurt others?

We are all broken. We all harbor hurts that we may not have fully dealt with and haven't forgiven. We've all experienced times when we feel our lives ravaged and chaotic. We've all stuck our fangs in others, spreading hurtful poison.

Here's the good news. Jesus became Incarnate to show us how to forgive even the most profound hurt. Jesus died and rose again, demonstrating that our most powerful enemies – death and evil – cannot defeat us. Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving us with the Holy Spirit to help us uncoil those deep hurts and forgive them. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to comfort us when evil or tragedy ravages our lives. Jesus came, died, rose, and ascended so that we could have peace in our hearts and so that peace would spread throughout our Christian community and the world. Jesus has given us the power of victory no matter the ferociousness of the snake's fangs or the size of the lion's teeth.

Every Advent, we prepare for the coming of Jesus. We prepare for the time when these symbolic beasts will lose their power. One way to prepare is to take the time to recognize those beasts. What is within us that needs taming? What needs to be brought into the light to heal?

Once we recognize the beasts that threaten us, we ask God to come with the power to tame these beasts. We ask for God's Spirit to create a peaceable kingdom within us that heals us and others.

An earth-shattering event occurred on that holy night in Bethlehem. An earth-shattering event happened when Jesus died and burst out of that tomb. Jesus defeated our greatest enemies – death and evil. Because of the coming of Jesus, those snakes within us can uncoil, come out of us, and flow out into the horizon with the sea.