

Of Scorpions and Thorns

Ezekiel 2:1-7; II Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13; Psalm 123 7-09-06

The other day, as I was working on this sermon for this morning, I decided I was becoming far too interested in the lifestyles of scorpions than I should be. The most I knew about them before doing a little research was that they were considered very creepy and that they made frequent appearances on the TV show, “Fear Factor” usually crawling over someone’s body in an enclosed space. I am exposed to such television delights when I spend time with my children.

I learned much more than those few facts about scorpions as I trolled the Internet for information. Did you know that scorpions have been around for over 400 million years? They belong to the arachnid branch of bugs. They carry their stingers in their tails, some live as long as 25 years. They range in size from .5 of an inch to 8.5 inches in length; they live on every continent but Antarctica; there are 1500 species of which only 25 are capable of killing people; some can go a year without food; the babies are called “scorplings” and there are 3 to more than one hundred in a batch of hatchlings. Scorpions are nocturnal and shy and will not bother us, we are assured, unless we bother them.

I am sure this is more than you ever wanted or needed to know about these wee beasties. But, I have not simply taken off on some flight of fancy in sharing all these details. Scorpions play a role in our reading from Ezekiel quite directly and in our other readings in a less direct manner. And, whether we live in close proximity with these literal spiders or not, we do live with figurative scorpions from time to time.

God, in speaking to Ezekiel, warns him of the briers and thorns that surround him—all the things that can snag and hold the message God would like to have his people hear and absorb. Too often, our Creator knows, teachings fall by the wayside and are hung up on preconceived notions and desires. Any way that seems too difficult to follow gets caught in the underbrush and left behind. All we need to do is consider the nation Israel’s struggles in the Old Testament to see that, and our own struggles with the concepts of the New Testament teachings of Jesus.

As if this is not bad enough, there are human scorpions, people who keep the messengers of God shut down by their stinging attacks. While few scorpions can kill a person, their poison can inflict painful, burning bites; enough to pause a person in his or her tracks and to have them reconsider the direction in which they are traveling.

Jesus warned his disciples of attacks by scorpions and of finding places in life where his message would not be received. He encountered this problem in his own hometown, where he spoke those familiar words about a prophet being “without honor.”

Pastors know well the difficult intricacies of becoming ministers in their own home churches. It is thought that people do not have the respect they should for someone who has grown up among them. I wonder if that is the reason for this taboo or whether it is that the potential pastor might know too much about the people in their own church. People never like us to know more than they choose to reveal to us.

Jesus knew those people in his town. He understood that his abilities would be tested more thoroughly by them than by any other people he would encounter. Few healings took place because of the scorpions that circled taking shots at him. He told his disciples to be wary of places in their journeys that were not receptive to his words and teachings. If there was a lot of resistance it was not worth their time and effort to remain. They were to shake the dust of those difficult places from their feet and move along. There can be nothing more discouraging than people who will not open their eyes that they might see. There is nothing better when some do.

If there be scorpions around us and briers and thorns somewhere out there, imagine how difficult it is to carry on when there is a thorn in one’s own flesh. Paul had all these problems with which to contend. Attacked from without, he was also plagued from within by a thorn in his flesh that has never been identified although speculation has run rampant. This makes whatever his problem was all the more intriguing—he was a man of mystery.

Paul was a fairly arrogant fellow, and it probably is a good thing he was. Had he not been the good news of Christ would not have been spread as far. If we consider his story we remember that he was changed from a person who hated and persecuted Christians to one of the greatest converts our faith has ever known. He had to have a measure of self-assurance to step out into the forefront of those he had persecuted so terribly. Of course, the other disciples being oh-so human had some problems with this. It's like a newcomer appearing in a small town that then proceeds to take over the leadership of its organizations. There is relief that someone will do it but also a measure of resentment and anger because there is someone who will do it. Go figure. Sometimes we find in our selves and our resistance to new people and new ways a little of that scorpion poison. Paul felt the stings of others.

But in spite of it all he kept on with his precious work. I am sure there were times when he had to withdraw and allow his wounds to heal. There were those times when he must have realized that there were no ears willing to hear his message and when he must have given up, sadly shaking the dust from his feet of an unresponsive place and moving on. He knew time was of the essence, he had to move quickly and plant the seeds of the gospel where he knew they would grow and flourish the best. But, even though he must have had great disappointments, he kept on.

Yes, there is a message in this for all of us. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune touch most of us as we travel our pathways through life. Briers and thorns snag us and hold us back keeping us from accomplishing all we could if we were free. Little darts of poison give us a jolt every now and then. But we need to remember we are a lot like those infamous Blues Brothers, Elwood and Jake, who were "on a mission from God." We have all been called to walk in the brightness of a new light, a new awareness of the meaning of life. We understand that we are valued workers, too valued to waste our time on people that cannot understand, have no desire to adapt and move forward. There are times when we need to shake the dust from our feet of those places that do nothing but exhaust us and drag us down.

If we learn how to move on even when shot with little poison darts or when snagged on the thorns of life, we can learn how to overcome the stagnancy that threatens to suffocate and destroy us. Paul knew how to do this. He kept on, as did Ezekiel in spite of all that might have stopped him. He kept on, as did Christ even though there was poison aplenty. We can do no less. Amen