

Wisdom, Mission, Snakes

2026 05 03 Toronto United Mennonite Church

'New Creation: Original Plan'

Children's time - Jonah and the Whale. - 144 The Peace Table

[Acts 28](#): Paul's shipwreck on Malta

Three weeks ago we heard the story of Easter morning. Jesus rose from the dead to a renewed life, and in these days of Easter we are exploring what it means to be a new creation.

Two weeks ago, Tim shared with us the strange conclusion of the Gospel of Mark. In Mark's original ending there is no resurrection, no proclamation of good news, only silence and fear, and a command to the disciples to return to Galilee. Later versions of the Gospel of Mark added a tidy ending. But the oldest versions direct the disciples to look for Jesus in Galilee where they first encountered him.

Last week, Christina took up the story of the disciples returning to their old lives - going fishing. John's gospel tells how they encounter the resurrected Jesus on the shore after a night with no fish. Jesus tells them to throw their nets on the other side and they bring in a huge number of fish - and Christina quoted the fisherfolk in our congregation who said that patience is not always a virtue in fishing. Knowing when to move to a new spot, try something different, that is more important than patience, if you want to go home with some fish.

One word we might use for that sense is 'wisdom'. It is a theme [I have preached on before](#). At the beginning of this year I described how, in this congregation, we are less focused on teaching people to follow the rules, and more focused on building up wisdom together, so that each of us knows the right thing to do, and the right time to do it.

Last week I borrowed a copy of *The Challenge is in the Naming* by Lydia Neufeld Harder, a collection of her essays. I flipped directly to chapter 8 on wisdom and discovered that years before I said anything about wisdom, Lydia had lived it, preached it, and written about it. Perhaps that's no surprise to those of us who know her?

Lydia describes three features of wisdom as a biblical concept. First, wisdom is embodied. It comes from our interactions with the natural world, and with our own lives and bodies. Creation is good - even if some theologies have said it is corrupt, fallen, an illusion or trap. We develop wisdom by taking our bodies and our embodied lives seriously. Secondly, wisdom mediates between different cultures and philosophies and priorities. Wisdom allows us to hear what is good in other spiritual and secular traditions, without resorting to theft or denial. Wisdom also mediates between the body and the spirit, so that we can take the body seriously, but acknowledge that there is more to consider. Finally, wisdom is Jesus - and Jesus is the Wisdom of God. Through Jesus, God creates the world, and so everything in the world is made through wisdom.

So let's recap. Jesus is executed by the state, but he rises again in fulfilment of the original plan of God. This invitation to new life first sends the disciples fishing, returning them to their homes. And then they learn that Jesus is calling them to live differently - to fish on the other side of the boat. Now we jump ahead to the close of the Acts of the Apostles, which tells the story of the early church, and largely addresses the question of how a Jewish movement has so many Gentile followers - so much so that in later centuries Christians and Jews seem to be entirely distinct categories - competitors, no longer sharing Holy Wisdom.

Acts is full of drama and intrigue. It has everything - accusation and vindication, epic speeches, political wrangling, surprises, miracles, imprisonment, and escape.

There are ten sea voyages in Acts, which as a narrative probably covers more miles than any other in the Bible. Wherever the followers of Jesus go in these early years, they find lurking danger, struggles to overcome, unexpected allies, and the grace of

God. Towards the end of the book, Paul has been summoned to Rome to defend himself from accusations.

Although Paul is a prisoner, he is treated with some degree of respect, likely because he is a citizen of Rome with access to some protection and privilege, even though he is also a Jew whose actions constantly stir up trouble for Roman governors. It is troubling to note that the Acts of the Apostles portrays the Jewish authorities as troublemakers and the Romans as a morally neutral power, with individual Romans like Paul's gaolers shown sympathetically. This way of telling the story emphasises simple concepts like heroes and villains, which make for compelling stories, but this is not a good guide to how to relate to our Jewish neighbours today.

Even with this overall trend, the Roman tendency towards efficient brutality is present - before Paul's ship runs aground, the author mentions that the Romans are preparing to kill all of the prisoners rather than risk them escaping in the storm. By this point, Paul has spent the voyage trying to encourage everyone to make good choices. Before they set sail into risky weather, he asks them to reconsider. As they head into storm, he leads them in prayer. Before they throw the grain overboard to lighten the load, he encourages everyone to eat something. And I am sure his prayers include the safety not just of the prisoners, but the soldiers and sailors taking them to Rome. Trying to get people to eat, pray, and not kill each other - basically what I do every Sunday.

In the passage we heard, Paul and company have swum and drifted to shore, and miraculously no one has perished. The local Maltese come to help them, lighting a fire and caring for their unexpected guests, but when they see a snake bite Paul they leap to an assumption that he is being punished for some sin he committed. No doubt it is clear that some of the shipwrecked people are prisoners of the Romans.

I am quite fond of snakes in the Bible, and I've preached before on the snake as a complex symbol of danger and death, but also of healing and restoration. Christina sought out stories about fishing; after this service, I would love to hear your stories

about snakes! I noticed how horrified the Maltese were to see this particular viper bite Paul, seeming to be a divine punishment to kill a man who had escaped the sea. But Paul simply shakes the snake off and carries on collecting firewood.

Here is an interesting coincidence. Do you remember that the Gospel of Mark ends suddenly in its earliest manuscripts, but that different endings have been added at later times? One of these endings includes the promise that the followers of Jesus will pick up snakes, and will drink poison, and will not be harmed, and they will lay hands on the sick, and they will be healed. The venomous snake is a potent symbol of the enemies of humanity - the spiritual forces as well as the natural forces that harm us. For this symbol to be neutralised shows the power of the resurrected life. And it is interesting to see that Paul does not defeat the snake with a healing miracle or fire from heaven. He simply goes back to his acts of care and service, stoking the fire, and suffers no ill effects. He has not conquered the natural world in the name of a victorious, colonizing Jesus. Instead, the natural world has treated him like Isaiah's vision of a child playing on the slopes of God's mountain, putting his hand into the adder's den, unharmed (Isaiah 11:8).

A small but persistent sect of Christians, mostly in the United States, have taken the promise in Mark very seriously, and they routinely incorporate handling snakes into their worship services. People are bitten, and sometimes they die - in which case the church believes that this was God's will for them. Snake handling as a religious practice has been fascination and a punchline for many years (Canadian Mennonite had a brief reference in their current issue), and it is fascinating to think that it seems to stem almost entirely from an addition to the Gospel of Mark which we do not even consider to be original.

From a certain point of view, there is nothing unreasonable about snake handling as a religious practice. They are trusting in the promise of God that they read in their Bibles. They have scattered examples like Paul's to take into account. This is how they see the resurrected life, and their acts of faith are in line with the promise of God for their safety.

It is true that life of the new creation is not without risk. It is never boring (and say what you will about snake handling, but their church services are not boring). Acts is exciting and engaging, but Paul's journeys are not safe, not fun. Although he encounters the power of God everywhere he goes, strengthening the church in each place, he does not want to be on this boat. Although Paul is happy to collect firewood, happy to give advice, happy to pray for healing of others, this is not where he wants to be. He is in chains, however amiable his gaoler. But he trusts in God.

Acts shows a model of Christian mission which interacts well with our own faith. The Anabaptist Community Bible notes that nowhere in Acts is a Christian shown using a weapon or using violence as part of their missionary activity. They trust in God. But snake handling? How can we make sense of this? If your child asks for a fish, which one of you would give them a snake? (Matt 7:10)

I'd like to suggest that wisdom makes the difference. Wisdom is the power of the Holy Spirit that equips us and enables us to know how to claim God's promises. Even if God promises that you will be safe from poison, it is not in keeping with Wisdom to pick up a snake and goad it to bite you to prove your faith.

In Christian theology, wisdom is the power by which God creates the universe. In the face of a chaotic and violent world, the Jewish mothers and prophets taught that God made the world with wisdom - with a basic sense of order, with universal values. When this original unity is shattered, God takes action to repair it. The created world - the fish, whales, snakes, stones, and human beings are all invited back into the right and just relationship with God and with one another. As Christians, we see this movement through the life, ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And we also see it in what happened next - the early church heard this good news that God has done everything necessary to reconcile all of creation, to reestablish order and wisdom as the foundation of reality, and went to tell people about it.

Christian Mission is a hard thing to talk about, because it is so interwoven with the history of harm we are struggling to respond to today. Christian mission is meant to arrive with good news, as good news. If mission is not undertaken with wisdom, it is out of order with the needs of the world. Paul is a traveller, and he finds community wherever he goes. He is not a passenger on a ship on the way to conquer a new land or colonise people, he is a prisoner being taken for questioning to the heart of the Empire. Because he acts with wisdom, tending to the needs of those around him, he is in tune with God's design for the world. He does not pick up a snake to prove his faith. He picks up firewood to warm shivering people, and they see his faith.

The resurrection life that Jesus initiated on Easter morning is a reconciliation of all God's creation. We still struggle. We still strike one another, poison lurks, and we are tempted to point the finger with assumptions and condemnation. But there is wisdom to know when to put down the gun, to hold the cruel word in silence, wisdom to teach us not to pick up a snake. Wisdom tells us when to shift our tactics, when to fish on the other side, when to return home, when to seek out new allies, when to go boldly toward the belly of the beast. And wisdom reminds us to take care of one another along the way.

Living into the new creation is our challenge and our destiny. Much of our world is still locked in its death spiral. But wisdom is God's original plan, and this is good news for us all. Let us be as wise as serpents, as innocent as doves, as caring as Paul, and as courageous in love as Jesus. Amen.