



Looking Death in the Eye

March 14, 2021

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross became universally recognized in 1969 with the publishing of her book "On Death and Dying." My wife and I got to know her thirty years ago, when Judy coordinated a conference on AIDS, Women and Children, with Elisabeth as the keynote speaker. Her book **On Death and Dying** begins with 2 Facts from psychiatry: DEATH among every known ancient culture has been distasteful, because it is INCONCEIVABLE to our UNCONSCIOUS, that Death is inevitable for us. Oh, we may become able to reason our way around this; but our Unconscious believes it is eternal, so if our life on earth must end that ending must be by a malicious intervention from outside sources. In simplest terms, the Unconscious can understand and fear being Killed, our Unconscious can understand the need to replace a Hip or Knees, but our UNCONSCIOUS cannot accept our own Unconsciousness ceasing by itself. Death must be BAD.

The Pandemic of the last 12 Months has: prevented Graduations, Weddings, Family Gatherings, hugging Grandchildren, holding hands, has destroyed Businesses, has effected travel; has resulted in praying the LORD's Prayer while washing our hands, has led to our trying to announce and project louder through masks, we could go on and on; but ultimately, this virus has forced each of us to face our own mortality! Each time, we had our noses swabbed; every time we learned we were in contact with someone who later developed symptoms of losing their smell and taste; following last year's Spring Break, Thanksgiving and Christmas when the infections and deaths spiked: THERE WAS A REFLECTION IN THE MIRROR, THAT WE COULD DIE.

Second according to Kubler-Ross, that to our UNCONSCIOUS, there is no distinction between wish and deed, between thought and an action. So when we hear of two unrelated circumstances, "I am so angry with my Mother" and "My Mother died," or "I was Bad ...my Mother left me," our Unconscious leaps to possibilities of causation that may be totally unrelated. This may work ETERNALLY but not MORTALLY.

In Philosophy this is a classic fallacy described in Latin as **POST HOC ERGO PROCTOR HOC**, literally AFTER THIS, THEREFORE BEFORE THIS. Meaning that because a circumstance happened, something must have come before to initiate this. This is a false hypothesis.

Our Call to Worship reading from Numbers this morning began with "The People Grew Impatient, speaking against God and Moses;" AND "the LORD sent Venomous Snakes and many Israelites died." There is nothing here to represent causation, that God was punishing the people for their complaining. It may be that people complained. It may be that God created poisonous snakes. BUT not necessarily that God created Poisonous Snakes because people complained. God also created Kittens and Puppies!

What I find fascinating is that the phrase translated “Venomous Fiery Snakes” is the same word used in the Call of the Prophet Isaiah’s description of the Throne-room of GOD, to describe **“SERAPHIM,”** the variety of Angels that are attendants in God’s Court, constantly calling out “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord our God” who used a burning coal to scorch away the sin of his lips. SO, during their wanderings in the wilderness, the people encountered creatures associated with God’s Holiness, and like looking upon God’s Face was too HOLY for us to live, finding these Creatures of God’s Court caused people to die.

What ARE related, are that The People came to Moses, saying “We have sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you, pray that the LORD take the snakes away.” BUT “the LORD instructed Moses to put an Image of DEATH upon a pole, for the people to see and live.” Faith is not a cure for our problems, God does not take away the snakes as the people requested. Instead what God provided is REDEMPTION.

Years ago, we had a teen ager in the church, who was a good kid but he made a horrible decision. As a 16 year old, he got drunk with a group of friends and driving a car, killed his best friend and permanently paralyzed a second friend. He was found guilty of Manslaughter. He was sentenced to Federal Prison. However, during his time away, and after he completed his sentence, we worked for his REDEMPTION. Twenty years later, he continues to volunteer working with kids to learn from his own experience. You see, Redemption is not as simple as paying the price for a crime, we need to own what took place, to own what we have done, to discern more about ourselves in the process, and I believe to help others from what we have come to believe. At the same time, there was another man, who had gotten in trouble with the Law over Drugs and Alcohol. With each, I went to Court and stood beside them. I visited each of them in prison. I offered to be there with them and do anything to help them be whole. Literally paying bills and managing their life for them to have a life when they got done. But the second, only served his time, and when released he continued with his addictions, he lied to me and to his family. Ultimately, because this second man was unwilling and unable to face what he had done, to change, I had to walk away from him.

REDEMPTION is harsh, so are Snake Bites, FAITH IN GOD is HARSH, so is our transmission of this pandemic. We had become lax about basic Public Health. We had become lax about faith in God. We had become a death defying culture, who believed we could take risks, we could ignore warnings, and we could not die. What we came to realize is that WE CAN DIE, and ALSO because of our Death Defying actions others who love us will die. There can be importance at staring at our mistakes like snakes, and deciding whether to own what we have done, what we are doing, or to let them and our fears own us.

I love the story of Nicodemus, every minister I have ever known has loved this story. For me because different from all the miracles and parables, the visit of Nicodemus is so transparent. This is the whole of the Gospel in one conversation. Nicodemus stated that the Pharisees knew Jesus came from God, because no one could do the things he does without having come from God. YET Nicodemus came by night, not wanting to be seen as seeking out Jesus. Nicodemus could not stretch to try to understand that life is more than about face value of what we can control and

understand today. As a Teacher of God's People, you have to believe in and trust God!

Jesus explains to Nicodemus that for humanity to Go to Heaven, someone must first have come from Heaven, God is the Creator so must initiate our Redemption. GOD so loved the world, God gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Certainly, The LORD who was able with a Word to create LIGHT in the formless Darkness of Space, who could provide all the elements necessary for life inside this Bubble, who with a word could separate CHAOS from ORDER, COULD HAVE with a Word Taken Away all SIN! God Could have taken away either Death or Life from Heaven. HOWEVER, Instead GOD entered into Life to find the Diamonds in the Muck of Life! THE GOD of Scripture is not a thing like Rock, Wood, or Fire, not static like a Mountain. GOD LOVES! And God Loves Us so Much that God Gets Dirty with Us in the Muck of Life. God gives us the power to be Redeemed!

Pastor Diane said it eloquently last Sunday, we need to look CROSS-EYED! We need to own and acknowledge that life is fragile and brief and also precious. So as we recognize that in this War, those who have been able to get vaccinated dodged a bullet that would have could have killed each one of us. We need to look through that symbol of what would have taken our lives, did take the lives of so many people around the world and consider two things:

Having looked at our worst fears, having stared Death in the eye, what difference will LIFE make to you? And related to this, because so many had their lives taken, their hearts and lungs scarred by survival of this disease, what are you going to do to help others?