

Creating Possibility: Learning to Live "As If"!

"Snakes and Mice and Elephants"

Rev. Karen S. Hagen

Gospel of Thomas Sayings #39, #18;

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

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Please bring to worship: 6 strips of paper and a container or clip in which to keep them throughout Lent and Easter.

So, the question is: Can we live creating possibility? Can we live "as if", "even though?" Will I live what I believe knowing I have everything already within me? ...do I even believe that?

It's a tough world out there. There are huge divides, false divisions and dichotomies. We live at a time that pressures us into extremes which invite no self-reflection or nuance: democrat or republican, racist or anti-racist, teachers/families, socialism for the rich/socialism for the poor, child/adult.

What do I believe?

We don't and the world doesn't grow when our efforts center on convincing ourselves or others by being a logic bully...about faith or anything else, for that matter. Bullying doesn't convince...it denigrates through fear and intimidation. Rather, growth happens when we come alongside to understand needs and motivations...our own and that of others and then reflect that back. ...like holding up a mirror so we can see our own thoughts or they theirs...more clearly.

And, you won't be successful if doing this as a way to manipulate to get the predetermined outcome you want. It must come from a genuine desire to understand motivations and deeply listening to help each other assess and appreciate intentions and goals...rather than change them...it's not a discussion. Maybe in so doing, a re-evaluating of a chosen means to chosen end/goal happens.

Start by focusing on yourself: Ask yourself how your preferred approach might work in practice vs as you assume. Play it out looking for complexities.

With others: Well, first you have to be with others...reminds me of Pat sharing about the Trump supporters that shoveled out a Democrat's driveway without expectation and left her confused and us asking, "Is this all it takes to begin something new?"

In coming along side someone in a caring, thoughtful way: Hear them into speech listening to understand rather than respond. Rather than try to convince them of anything or ask them why, ask them to play out their approach to demonstrate how that would work. Let them discover complexities or wrinkles in their thinking. Then, as they see for themselves, they may adjust those means to their desired end.

It comes down to putting on your oxygen mask first before helping others. Understanding yourself first, so you can live "as if." So you can honestly say "Even though.... I believe..."

and so I choose to act according to my faith and not the circumstance.

It is not my job/role to change others, it's my job to look at myself and change, save me...putting things in the right order. I will live my life forward. I will live an 'As If Life' now!" For the new realm is here! I will create possibility.

It comes down to understanding myself. It comes down to understanding someone vs changing someone. The rest is up to them. And it necessitates m being humble...letting go of my own fear and guilt enough so...I can think.

So how to then how to bring possibility? Again, not by logic bullying disguised as discussion. Not by making someone feel bad about themselves or have to defend themselves. Not when what you are questioning is connected to the fabric of the other's identity, lodged in community, friendships, and faith. More on this next week...

Last week we said, you can't open up "possibility" (convince anyone of anything) by making them feel bad about themselves. ...by questioning the fabric of their identity which is lodged in culture, community, friendships, and faith. Think of it this way: it's like they're sitting atop this huge elephant of identity which doesn't change course easily. Each of us is a rider on an elephant of self-identity.

The rider part of you is your conscious verbal reasoning, logical thinking self of which we are often aware. The elephant represents all that has formed our identity (99% of which we are not aware). The elephant is powerful and a lot more formidable than the rider.

So, first of all, if we want to stay on the Way...live "as if" in the realm, we need to know our own elephants first...what is truly guiding our subconscious reactions and affecting how we think and where we will go and won't go!

And, to convince or persuade someone else, speak to their elephant, not the rider...for it is the elephant that has the power to control which direction its rider is going to go. If the elephant likes you, is beginning to hear and trust you, it is more likely it will move in your direction and persuade the rider to go along.

To do this, you need to come close enough to the other riders to know their elephants...by their first names so to speak. But...no discussion, no logic bullying ...listening. Ride alongside. Let our elephants kiss and discover nuances and ramifications and play things out differently in their minds and so, maybe affecting their end destinations! To help do this, maybe try speaking "as if" the world and our God were listening to each word you speak to those elephants. Ah...the art of persuasion.

Let's listen this week to the first half of this video on the art of persuasion (3:41):

<https://youtu.be/24adApYhoyc>

So focus a moment on your own elephant...

What is the mouse...that frightens your elephant? ...so then, the elephant runs away with you? Stampedes? Is your mouse: immigration, voting rights, poverty? Are these the mice that cause your elephant to stampede over your ability to listen to yourself or anyone else?

Remember: our mice are formed by, have a diet of our fears, guilt, and past experience.

BTW, You know, if we ride our elephants all the way to Jerusalem, nose to nose, our elephants gets smaller and the cross you carry gets lighter on the Way....your heart opens wide. (And, I'd rather be trampled by turtles than elephants. That's a music joke!)

Last week we used a metaphor: Elephants, riders...and mice! Today let's explore more about those elephants of the subconscious which our logical selves sit atop.

We'll continue to listen to Jon Haidt as he speaks about "morality markers"...we might name that differently for our purposes. He uses these markers to speak of the divisions of republicans, democrats, and libertarians. An example helpful to us as this is a key topic of conversation right now. But I invite you to think in broader terms.

Jonathan Haidt - Listen to video starting on 3:53. <https://youtu.be/24adApYhoyc>

Here are the markers that shape how we become who we are...form the elephant on which our rational minds ride: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity, and Liberty.

He says Libertarians have strong system thinking capabilities but weak on empathy. So, they have a harder time relating to others but are extremely good thinkers on problems. We need them...their elephants in our herd. ...each other's herds.

So how do you persuade them...someone to come alongside?

First, acknowledge them just the way they are...see their elephants as real.

And be aware of how you approach that elephant!

Are you in combat mode or discovery mode or relationship mode?

If our thing is to get into a discussion, that's usually combat mode, bullying with logic. And so, the other goes into defensive mode.

But when we come alongside in curious mode or relationship mode, others tend to open up. MLK said, "It's hard to hate someone when you know their stories."

When you come alongside to listen instead of convince, the elephants are more likely to move toward each other.

But ultimately, the most important aspect of coming alongside, elephant to elephant, is for their riders to embrace humility (get the right size).

...allowing ourselves to revisit our thinking to examine any faulty thinking, acknowledging that we *can* understand certain points made or have had a shared experience, modeling in ourselves what we would like to see in them i.e. Self-doubt, a willingness to rethink.

Ultimately more humility is key is in connecting. No one of us has it "right." Together we are so much more "wise." ...as in wisdom circles!

Key to initiating a cognitive reframing of issues...humble listening, curious to understand, a sharing of experiences, building relationship.

Another way to say this is: be compassionate.

"No one cares how much you know till they know how much you care." Teddy Roosevelt.

Sara shared it this way this week...the ability to show compassion for another is represented in the difference between these two approaches when your partner forgets your birthday.

My partner forgot my birthday. They don't love me. VS
Someone I love forgot my birthday.

Can you hear the difference...feel it in yourself?

No one wants their elephant to stampede...mice or not!
We all want to caravan.

Prompting:

What are you afraid of? Right now! The mouse that causes your elephant to run away with you or stampede over others?

Numbers asks it this way: What's jumping up & biting you?

Let's explore what's going in Numbers as we begin.

In the story, they complain.

Theologians understand their complaining to be part of an undercurrent of murmuring in the desert...

first about no food-then given manna,
then no water-springs from a rock,
and now the food and water not good enough

*...murmur...more like restlessness...perhaps having lost sight of their entrusted,
common vision...their end goal.*

It says they were impatient...

the Hebrew word actually means “**short on soul**”.

So, to be patient is to be **long on soul**. With a long soul, you can take the longer view and trust in a new future you can't quite see yet...focus less on immediate reward or more on long term gains. You see things differently.

Makes sense. Short sightedness, complaining, only seeing what is immediately at hand, losing patience often come together...as 1 big elephant.

Hmmnn...

~Would say you are able to see the bigger picture in life right now... able to assess things in light of the long view of things?

Are you that cunning?

~When was the last time you were short on soul, impatient and probably complaining/demanding? What did that look like? How did things play out in the long run?

Sometimes we're more comfortable in the darkness of a known problem and pattern, than in the light of perspective and possibility?

Who are you as a rider...where is your elephant taking you?

To live, to find patience for the situation...you have to face what it is that is biting you, killing you, scaring you, pushing your buttons. You come face to face with it... often in the mirror!

Therein lies our own healing...our way to live in the realm.
A new beginning.

And realize, being healed doesn't mean no more snakes, no more mice. But, the next time you are face to face with that snake, you see it from a new, more compassionate, self-aware perspective...and your elephants doesn't run away with you.

There are serpents/mice everywhere. Our focus is not to get rid of them but to learn how to live with them.

We too, like the Hebrews,
even though God has brought us out from our Egypt
and through the wilderness and provided for our needs,
even though the journey isn't over and neither is God,
we too often look at life without enough gratitude and faith...
short on soul...without perspective,

we become impatient and murmur...as if there was no other choice for us or wanting someone else to set mouse traps!

The Hebrews acted as if they have no power of their own, ability to think or create possibility. Instead they complain:

“Do something! Somebody do something about this life of mine. I want more than just my basic needs met, and now! ...no matter what the long term potential.”

And what do they get for all their complaining? Snakes.
It backfires.

If we go beyond the surface of the story to its symbolism, given our fear of snakes and how anxious even seeing one snake can make us,

we could say the snakes represent the fears and anxieties of the people. Unreal and maybe unfounded.

Fear and anxiety a rea natural consequence of their inability to stay attached to their long term goal, vision and the good in their own story...God's grace alive amongst them!

Like getting so frustrated saving money for a newer car whose purchase seems so far off, that you spend all your money on something else that doesn't satisfy...and then complain about it and blame the "times" for your not having that car.

Like being angry with a friend and dumping the friendship rather than confronting the issues.

Like I just don't want to wear a mask anymore despite the science so I won't and my grandma falls sick

They complain and blame and fold in on themselves.

They are bitten by their own anxieties and fears.

They are making themselves sick.

Are you...making yourself sick?

What's the snake that's biting you?

The mouse causing you to stampede?

(Might you like to take a breath, light a prayer candle acknowledging your bitterness/pain/fear and open yourself to a new perspective and possibility?)

Snakes. Several ancient gods were associated with snakes...and healing!

The AMA even has two snakes on a stick as their symbol of healing. The meaning of the word serpent/seraph is "to burn...as in fire."

The dual characteristics of fire are its capacity
to purify or destroy.

So, the bite can either purify them or destroy them...
it's up to them...you.

Will they/you blame and complain or will we own up to our fears and anxieties to discover what is just beneath them?

Will you live courageously and look first at yourself and then to our do-over God for a new beginning in grace...

or will you stay stuck on the subject expecting someone else to intervene in the issue and save you from yourself?

All the while, complaining.

How do you choose to live?

Remember: You cure the snake bite with its own venom,
a vaccination uses the very illness to prevent itself.

Too much of a good thing is bad.

Too little, and that's not good either.

Put your snake on a stick. Look at it! Face it.
If you do, you live.

In John...Jesus says **he must also be lifted up**...as Moses lifted the serpent on a stick...so look more deeply at what is biting you, frightening you and save yourself with the truth!

Christ on a stick...a cross. A symbol of encouragement.

In this often cited verse: John 3:17, Jesus' focus is not on himself but on us and our living fully!

...Jesus points us toward relationship with God.

...to the long soul and the end goal. Begin and end there.

Be clever about it, gentle about it.

Jesus does not point us toward a set of ideas of right belief but toward living as if on the way, with justice for all.

This is not an exclusive gateway for Christians to get into heaven. Never ever does Jesus talk in this way. He is constantly saying heaven, the realm of God, is here and now.

Live as if it is! Begin again.

Get a right perspective, a long soul.

Look yourself in the mirror, look the snake in the eye.
Quiet those other complaining voices. Listen to elephants.

“I did not come to condemn the world but to save it!”

~To condemn, in Greek, means divide apart...from each other...to fraction yourself...pull you apart.

God longs that we be whole.

~Jesus comes to save you...help you put things in the right order...a salve for the healing you need most now. To tame the elephant.

Jesus shows us how to look life straight on to discover truth.


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If you don't face the facts...in the life you have created for yourself as you respond to the dessert you live in...

the facts will jump up and bite you right where  
it will hurt you most!

The venom of snakes has the power to kill you or save you!

Living in denial, kills.  
Facing the truth about ourselves is the very thing  
that can save us!

You can be wise...and gentle!

“Turn your life around, look at what you're doing,  
does life have to bite you before Holiness get your attention?

The Child of Humanity comes so you may have life...  
a life worth living!

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We feel about our lives the way we do for very good reasons.

**What matters is what we do with the feelings
we have, how we face the facts and the faith,
and how we look to God...even though.**

We can stop being so short on soul perspective
and start living...long!
It's up to us!

Snakes of grief, loss, fear, anger, anxiety,
low self-esteem often surround us.

We have the power to see them clearly, to pray seeking wisdom, forgive ourselves and
have compassion for one another so we can live...
snakes and all!

Where will you begin? There is no end to God's care!

“I remember that all through history
the ways of truth and love have always won.
There have been tyrants, and murderers,

(snakes, unbelievers, impatience, darkness,
inner voices, mice and run-away elephants)
and for a time they can seem invincible,
but in the end they always fall.
Think of it - always.”

Mahatma Gandhi

In the church, this narrative is basic:

Jesus loves us...loves you. Jesus knows you.
Holiness gives you everything you need to journey with Him on the Way.
Live “as if.”

So, on one of your pieces of paper please fill in this question:
Even though....., I believe..... .

On the other side, please finish this intention:
I choose to life as if..... .

Live “as if” as your faith brings you back to solid ground.
There is a new heart within you to do just this!