

The Old Testament reading is an account from the post Exodus generation of converts to early Judaism. The story occurs during the time of wilderness wandering before the people settled in the promised land. It is a complex narrative of faith which attempts to depict the intimate connection between the workings of human sin and divine salvation. The issue of sin is imaged in the plague of snakes and in the words of Israel's complaint against God and Moses: *Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?* The faith message of salvation is conveyed through the image and metaphor of the bronze snake uplifted up on a stick. The saving power of faith is embedded in the Lord's command to look up at the snake and live.

#### "HISS-TORY"

And the Lord said to Moses, *Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.* Numbers 21:8

John Flavel wrote in *Keeping the Heart*, "*The greatest difficulty in conversion is to win the heart to God and the greatest difficulty after conversion is to keep the heart with God.*" How true. Especially for a fainthearted wanderer trapped in a viper pit like the one T.E. Lawrence described in his memoirs. *The valley seemed creeping with horned vipers and puff-adders, cobras and black snakes. By night*

*movement was dangerous; and at last we found it necessary to walk with sticks, beating the bushes each side . . . A strange thing was the snake's habit, at night, of lying beside us, probably for warmth, under or on the blanket."*

- (Christian Century, Snake on a Stick by Patrick Wilson, p. 223, March 2, 1994) And how true for the newly converted Exodus wanderers who, when they spoke against God and Moses with the words, **Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? got hit with a plague of snakes that was sent by God! Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.**

The Bible names death as Love's worst enemy. It is the greatest power that causes us to be in the sinful existential condition of separation from the heart of God. Its power within us is experienced as fear of death and an idolatry of human power. Combined, they turn creative powers for life into evil. Fear of death and idolatry of power have written the HISS-TORY side of our human story in which the vermin side of our human nature rules. Our HISS-TORY is colored with deception, division, accusation, devaluation, meaninglessness, despair, hopelessness, violence, murder, war . . . HISS-TORY is our story whenever we treat ourselves or others in less than human ways. This HISS-TORY is encapsulated in the dark humor of Monty Python's History of the World movie in the Middle Ages

plague scene. The scene features men going through the streets of a town collecting the dead in wheelbarrows. They were shouting out, "Bring out your dead." When the people heard them calling they threw out the bodies onto the wheelbarrow. When one of the bodies hit the wheelbarrow it spoke out and said, "I'm not dead yet" . . . To which the collector said, "But you will be," and hit him on the head with a hammer.

The Bible teaches us that the battle against the powers that create human HISS-TORY must be fought in every generation and by every person. In the Lenten season of the Christian tradition it is a battle that we can fight by discerning the powers that cause us to sin and by naming the grace that uplifts us in our spiritual fight.

First, let's examine the sin that is connected to our fear of death and our idolatry of human power. At first glance this is a force that we experience internally as hubris or pride. It presents itself as a refusal to accept death --- to humbly accept our finite nature. (World's Greatest Collection of Church Jokes, p. 255-252)

The joke, the "Last Words" reminds us of this non-accepting part in each of us. *There were three men standing at the gates of heaven with St. Peter, "Tell me, what would you like to hear your relatives or friends say at your funeral?" the Saint asked. The first man answered, "Because I'm a renowned physician, I'd love to hear someone say how I'd been instrumental in saving someone's life." The second man reported that he was a*

*family man and a schoolteacher and that it would be wonderful if someone said that he had been a wonderful father and husband and that he had made a difference in some young person's life. The third man before St. Peter said, "Wow, you guys, those are really great sentiments, but I guess if I had my choice, I would hear someone say, 'Look! He's moving!'"*

Internally, it also presents itself as magical protective power. I grew up in the mountainous river valley of Lake Plymouth. There were snakes in the woods, snakes in the front yard, and snakes in the lake. Snakes scared me silly then just as they scare me now. I couldn't outrun or outswim them then anymore than I can outrun them now. So my mother told me a secret one day when I refused to go into the lake for my swimming lessons at the beach---at the end of the lake--- where the dam was---where all the kids knew that the meanest snakes lived. She told me that the snakes were not allowed to swim at the beach in the roped off water where the kids swam. I believed her and went in. As you can see, it was a mental strategy that worked well for me as a kid. Problem is, we don't stay children forever. As we grow out of our magical thinking the sin of hubris, fear of death and the need to prevent our death escalate into behaviors that attempt to prevent the worst from happening. In short, we do all kinds of things to rid ourselves of the snakes among us. I didn't realize how deep this was in me until I moved to Texas where everything is bigger, even my fear of snakes. One day I was out in my backyard weeding

my garden when I turned over a rock and came face to face with a nest of baby snake like creatures. I screamed. When no one came to rescue me I knew it was upon me to rescue my children from the poisonous bite of the vipers. Without thinking, I grabbed the hoe and quickly took out the enemy with repeated Lizzie Borden wacks. It wasn't until the deed was done that I realized the depth of my propensity towards preventative violence. When I looked at the poor little chopped up creatures I realized that they weren't even snakes at all. They were a family of friendly green lizards that just hadn't sprouted their legs yet. In the human arena, preventative HISS-TORY of this sort presents itself as preemptive attacks on whomever we perceive as an enemy to us. It is "take out the enemy before the enemy gets us" kind of action. It is the force behind hate crimes, domestic violence, verbal abuse . . . It happens everywhere, even in the church. This fear of death and the sin of preventative elimination of the enemy overtook a seminary student on BU's campus last week. A student put a threatening death note in the locker of an openly gay fellow student. The Methodist informed faculty and administration who agree with the theology that homosexuality is a sin (not a perspective that the majority of UUA and UCCers' share) took no action against this hate crime.

In our final discernment of the sin that contributes to our HISS-TORY we must lastly take a look at our idolatry of power. Idolatry of power is most easily recognized in the culture in the popularization of E-TREME sports, reality

TV survival shows and the like. They all glorify the human power to defy death. A lead CNN story this week featured the popular Malaysian competition of cobra kissing. The sport is to see who can kiss the cobra the most number of times in four minutes. The winner this year made the Guinness World Record Book with 51 kisses. Another lead story told about an American war hero. In the war against Iraq he successfully used his own body to shield his team against enemy fire. It was an awesome, heart rendering real life story about how a sergeant stepped into the line of gun fire and made himself into a human shield to save his friends. It was a act of great courage that according to the teachings of Jesus is also the greatest act of love that one human being can offer to another. What he did revealed the power of love. But, sadly, he did something after the good deed that added to humanity's HISS-TORY book. After he recovered from his multiple gunshot wounds he contracted with a toy company to make him into an action hero figure. They scanned his body image to replicate his actual physical likeness. He objected when the reporters referred to it as a doll and insisted that it was a hero action figure. Then he went on to say that there will be no greater moment of pride for him as a father than when his son plays with the hero figure---and the face on it is his. In his efforts teach his son the value of sacrificial self giving, the good sergeant, didn't realize the depth to which he glorified his own death defying power. He didn't realize the harm that he was doing to his son in making himself into an idol of power that his son could look up to. He didn't know that

he was teaching his son the lie . . . .that his earthly father holds ultimate power against death . . . . That there is no higher power than his father or when he grows up in his father's image, himself.

It is this lie that the Lord disarmed in the Biblical wilderness story. It's the lie that the Lord didn't mess around with when newly converted Exodus wanderers said that they were afraid of dying. It's the lie that prompted the Lord to fight fire with fire or in this case, snake with snake. So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Numbers 21:9 The snake lifted up on a stake was not an idol to worship but rather a grace filled symbol of the Creator's power over death---God's larger story of life. It was a symbol of faith that lifted up the eyes of the person to see a meta-narrative of life in which our story of death is held, redeemed, and makes some sense. To illustrate this understanding of faith to his students, *Old Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias once told a portion of his life history in Israel where his parents were missionaries with his students. He shared that after WWII he returned nervously to Israel to see if the treatment of Jews by the Nazi regime had severed forever his friendships there. When he knocked at the door of an old friend, he was welcomed with an embrace. He joined his friend in the backyard, where a crude tent had been erected for the*

*observance of the Feast of Tents or Booths, a time of recalling Israel's wandering in the desert, dwelling tents. Fastened on the entrance to the tent were two slips of paper, each bearing a brief message: on the left was "From God": on the right was "To God." There simply yet dramatically said Jeremias, was the whole of life: from God, to God, and in the years between, a tent. (From God to God by Fred Craddock, Christian Century, March 22, 2003, p. 18)*

Yahweh's snake on a stick meta-story of return to the heart of God, through the power of faith, disarms our fear of death and shatters the idolatry of our finite earthly human powers. According to the gospel writer John, it was the same way that God didn't mess around with the lie of the power of death in Jesus. God counteracted the power of death by resurrecting him and lifting him into his Heavenly Parent's greater story of eternal life. The gospel writer said it this way in John 3:14-16. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. From God to God, and in the years between, a grace-filled earthen vessel overflowing with the eternal life and love of God.