

Sunday, March 14, 2021

St. John's

Once upon a time, a man named Moses told an Egyptian Pharaoh, *my God says to tell you, let my people go*. A cheeky thing to do, really. Pharaoh *was* a god. And all around him were statues of the other gods. *Who is your god?* Pharaoh asked, playing along with this fellow who had long ago been a member of the royal household. Moses' answer was to turn his staff into a snake, a cool piece of magic. The Emperor nodded to his own magicians, who knew a similar trick. They did it, too.

A cold war then began between Moses' God and Pharaoh. The Nile turned into blood. A plague of frogs. Gnats. Boils. Locusts devouring the crops. Hail stones everywhere except the slave ghetto. Pharaoh was stubborn, but Moses' God more so. An angel of death swept through Egypt on the last night of slavery, and everyone's firstborn child was killed. The slaves had prepped for this, painting their doorposts with a bloody sign to the angel to pass over. As day dawned, they headed east.

Thirty nine and a half years later, with his brother and sister recently buried and himself near the very end, Moses had to listen to the slaves complain about the food. The boring manna. The nasty-tasting water. God lost patience with them and sent poisonous snakes. One more time, Moses begged God for help; and one more time, God gave him a bit of magic involving a staff and a snake. It worked.

The story is so old. The portrait of God is impressive and, honestly, unattractive. Very male. Very powerful. Fierce. Stubborn. Vindictive. But responds to flattery.

And hey: God got us out of slavery, says the next couple of hundred pages of scripture, so we'd better show some respect.

Fifteen hundred years later, God has changed a lot. For one thing, God incarnated, which to Hindus is quite a normal thing to do; since sometimes messages and whirlwinds aren't enough. For another thing, God's avatar was not a heavenly warrior going up against Pharaoh, but a craftsman named Jesus. The closest Jesus ever got to the Emperor was when he stood in front of Governor Pontius Pilate for questioning. Nothing like *let my people go!* Just a couple of cryptic sentences about the truth and his kingdom not being of this world.

The way John tells it, Jesus knew how his life was going to end a year or more before it did. I'm going to be lifted up, he said, and not like a flag or the Super Bowl trophy. Actually, I'm going to end up on a gallows. But don't think for a minute that I will be ashamed. And don't be ashamed yourselves when it happens. Instead, I want you to think of old Moses in the parched desert, making a bronze snake and putting it up on a pole. Lifting it up where people could see. Making them look up at the sky, the heavens, the sun, the light. Rescue, not shame!

Jewish rabbis have discussed this mysterious bronze serpent from time to time. It apparently stood in the Temple for centuries, a reminder that God can curse when we have it coming. The snakes were a curse. But God hopes to save. God promises to heal those who look up, to the bronze symbol and beyond.

In fact, putting divine symbols on top of poles and planting them in the ground was really common then. Asherah, one of the most famous goddesses, was so commonly displayed at the top of a pole for all to see that the Bible simply calls the poles "Asherahs."

She was the consort of the Sky-God Ba'al, who the natives of the land worshipped. Yahweh's competition. In some cultures, Asherah was married to Yahweh, but never in the Bible. If she wasn't a human figure, she was a lioness, an angel, a dove.

For hundreds of years, these Asherah poles could be found in villages and along the roadsides at sacred shrines. People would leave offerings. Say prayers to her. We do not know if people said any prayers to the bronze snake on his sacred pole.

About seven hundred years later, King Hezekiah ordered the Nehushtan, the bronze serpent on the pole destroyed. It wasn't a memorial any more. It was an idol, he declared, like all those Asherah poles. The Jews of the ten northern tribes had gone over to the pagan side, put up poles, married nonjews, went to fortune-tellers and swore oaths to fake gods. We're getting rid of all the idols. They don't heal us. Don't save us.

Back to Jesus, and end of history lesson.

Scripture is full of prescriptions for our many sicknesses. Instead of aspirin or vaccination or hip replacement, the Good Book tells us

- When the Jewish New Year comes, take ten days to ask forgiveness and repay debts. Then fast for a day and tell God all you have done in the last year that was wrong, and God will forgive you.
- Burn a candle every day for a year, say this certain prayer, and take the time to mourn. You will learn to love the memory of the one who died.
- Hold your child lovingly and bless her at the beginning of every Friday night sabbath, and you will have the grace to bring her up well, walking in God's ways.
- And then much later, in the New Testament, we read, believe in Jesus as the Christ, and you will be healed.
- Make a habit of serving others. Wash their feet, sometimes literally.
- Forgive others and you will feel forgiveness.
- Share the bread and wine and it will be like God circling back through you.

Just as I am imagining you all are listening to me, even though I am really alone, trying to make eye contact with my cell phone; a large part of healing is imagination. But it's still true. You are really there, and I "see" you! When we sit with God and imagine her having arms to comfort us or imagine him having arms to stretch out, on a crossbeam, God is really there. Our brain waves during dreams or watching a movie are pretty much the same as when we watch something in real life. That doesn't mean God is fiction, it just means that our minds form pictures that help us understand things like being healed or saved. Processes that are beyond our five senses. And our bodies change in response.

Science now knows that when the DNA of two people dance inside a cell and recombine, that's how uniqueness is created. Saying that God breathed into a clay figure and called it Adam is not science. But it's still a way of telling the truth. Science knows how cells change and become cancerous. Science even sometimes knows why and when. Science knows that what we used to call a broken heart is not a cardiac problem at all. Science knows that paralysis is not caused by secret sins.

Spirituality offers a powerful mindset, and science notices this. The physician and surgeon, the occupational therapist and the dietician all know what will usually work. And our souls know that love heals. Telling the truth with kindness heals. Admitting our addiction and turning to a power greater than our craving; that heals. Our souls know that being deeply loved not just by the people around us but by the universe herself, that heals.

Love and hope and faith.

All we are, church, is a community that imagines together. We do all these things, these sacraments, these zoom calls, to help us see and feel the invisible truth we call God.

So Jesus points to the gallows, a year before he's staked there. He tells his followers: *just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent, I will be lifted up*. Don't just see the horror of execution. Look UP. See beyond the physical symbol. Not a snake. Not just my corpse. See what it means: there is healing even when it looks like death. For centuries, a snake wound 'round a staff has been a medical symbol of healing. For 2,000 years, a figure nailed to a cross has been a symbol for "God loved the world this much."

When we see the oak tree in the acorn, then we know. When we see the new life in the ashes of our old life, then we know. When we see the beautiful in the ugly, the power in the weakness. When we stop seeing the bronze serpent, or the crucified carpenter, and see instead the healing love, the sympathy for us, the understanding of our plight, then we know.

When we see the good in Bad Friday.

That's why we are here, to learn these stories. To find our place in them.

Keep looking up, the rabbis say; keep looking up, Jesus says, until all you see is God, and when that happens, you will know.

The fiery bronze serpent was a representation of the curse God had put upon the Hebrews. Putting it up in the air forced everyone to look up at it, and “up” is where God is. Ditto with Jesus being put up on a tree, and lynching victims, and flags, and advertising billboards. Putting something “up” is publicizing it. Cross on top of St. John’s, the angel atop the Temple in Salt Lake City. The star on your Christmas tree. The processional cross. The flag.

Asherah was Ba’al’s consort. In some places, she was Yahweh’s consort. In your household shrine, she was symbolized by a pole. Maybe a tree. A dove. A female angel. A lioness.

When the *Nehushtan* started being treated like an Asherah, King Hezekiah had it removed from the Temple.

When the Crucifix became, for the Protestants, an object of worship, it was replaced by a much more abstract cross.

Caduceus (two snake medical symbol of healing) (sign of Hermes, patron of thieves, merchants, and messengers)
and Rod of Asclepius (one snake on rod) (revered Greek god of healing)

OT Reading Num 21:4-9 {Parshat Chukat} From Mount Hor the Israelites set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 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." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, *Nehushtan*, Hezekiah later ordered "it" smashed in his reform. Maybe and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Ephesians 2:1-10 You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

FIRST
Made to do good works

then
lived a dead life, sinning, following *this world*
The ruler of the power of the air, the disobedient
Spirit, we are children of wrath like everyone
else

now
saved, raised, seated, gifted
graced, undeserved gift, planned
beforehand for us

John 3:14-21 Jesus said, "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.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

The serpent was the symbol of human temptation, and Jesus is the opposite.

Look up, look at the serpent, look at what is raised up, advertisements