

Look out! Watch where you're going! Look at this! Look at me! All these expressions show that it matters where we focus our attention—-sometimes with life and death implications. Now we are currently in a wilderness situation where signposts and maps are not available to help us see where we're going. Like the wilderness journey in today's Old Testament reading, the pandemic has been a time of being without our usual ways of life, structures, connections and directions. And while we probably haven't been dealing with snake bites, there certainly have been things that have challenged, frightened, and worried us. The struggle of being in a new environment under new conditions without many of the old patterns and landmarks has been so difficult, and the reality that there is no end in sight, makes the Israelites' desert journey very relevant to us today.

Louise McColl

Snakes, which throughout Scripture are symbols of evil, probably get that reputation because they are insidious, slipping unobtrusively through the landscape, well-camouflaged, silent and then suddenly striking, often with deadly results. So too, with temptation and sin. And we can connect with the Israelites' tendency to whinge and complain—only our words are: when will the pandemic be over, why do we have to wear masks, I'm tired of social distancing and not going out. Now I don't want to minimize the huge realities that we have faced over the last year; there is much that has been so truly difficult—deaths that could not be attended or grieved as a community; the inability to hug and support each other physically; the people who have sickened, and the ones who have succumbed to this disease; those who have experienced huge

Louise McColl

isolation and its emotional devastation; and those who have struggled financially. But, there is the question of how we respond to these challenges.

We can, like the Israelites, look at our present circumstances and become discouraged and downhearted; we can look back at our lives, pre-pandemic, and build resentment and bitterness that we no longer have the freedoms and flexibility of that time; or we can do what God calls those who are bitten to do: put the snake on a pole and look at it. This only makes sense when we move to the Gospel reading where Jesus says: “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” This is not saying that Jesus is evil, but that he is carrying our sins, our failings and misdeeds on the cross. Looking up, not only to the forgiveness we receive through the

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cross, but to God's love for us is crucial for surviving in this wilderness time.

Jesus sacrificed Himself because God loved the world—-not just the good guys, not just the believers, but the **whole** world, people and all of creation. And that takes us back to the Psalm which begins with “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.”

Over the last year, I have been struck by the frequency of that phrase “steadfast love” in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word is “hesed” and it means enduring, reliable, everlasting love, compassion and mercy. And the Bible really **is** a love story, a history of God's unending, unending love for the world; his efforts to bring us all into a close, loving relationship with Him, to trust in his absolute care for us. We, like the psalmist, can say:

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“Let (us) thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.” Meditating on God’s love can carry us through many difficult times.

As with the Israelites, looking at our own distress distracts us from the needs of others. We need to look around at the challenges that the pandemic has thrown into bold relief: the risks to women in abusive relationships; the fragility of the poor and the homeless; the vulnerability of Indigenous people and people of colour; and these are just some of the significant needs in our communities. Looking beyond our own issues is what we are called to, in response to the love we have received.

It has been easy to lose hope during the pandemic—-when will it be over? Will we catch this

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disease? Will we ever get the vaccine in our arms? Are we ever going to be able to gather with friends and family and be up close again?? As we look ahead, we need to remember that there are signs of hope, and to focus on the positive indications that there is an end to this event.

We are on a desert journey; many distractions have been eliminated from our lives; may that enable us to recognize God's hesed, His steadfast love which sustains us, heals us, and carries us. As Paul says: "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." Let us look to that true source of hope. Amen