



Taking Up Serpents

Music by Kamala Sankaram
Libretto by Jerre Dye

Photo Credit: Russell Lee

Prepared for The Glimmerglass Festival by Kelley Rourke and Nick Richardson

From the Dramaturgs

Ssssssalutations, Glimmerglass.

This dramaturgy packet explores topics related to Kamala Sankaram and Jerre Dye’s *Taking Up Serpents*, which had its world premiere at Washington National Opera in 2018. This summer, it appears in a double bill with *Holy Ground*, Damien Geter and Lila Palmer’s modern riff on the Annunciation. This packet includes links to several external sites, including a [Google Drive](#) with PDFs of additional articles.

If there are any topics you’re interested in exploring more deeply, don’t hesitate to reach out.

Sssssincerely,
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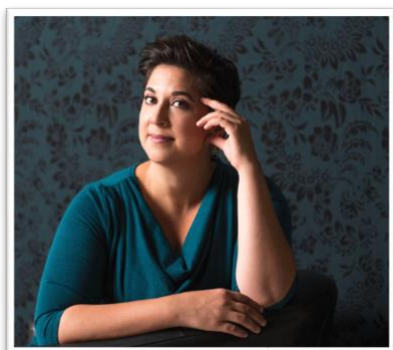
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Meet the Creators

Kamala Sankaram, composer (Artist in Residence)

Praised as “one of the most exciting opera composers in the country” (*Washington Post*), composer **Kamala Sankaram** moves freely between the worlds of experimental music and contemporary opera. Recent commissions include works for the Glimmerglass Festival, Washington National Opera, the PROTOTYPE Festival, and Creative Time, among others. Kamala is known for her operas fusing Indian classical music with the operatic form, including *Thumbprint*, *A Rose, Monkey and Francine in the City of Tigers*, and the forthcoming *Jungle Book*. Also known for her work pushing the boundaries of the operatic form, recent works include *The Last Stand*, a 10-hour opera created for the trees of Prospect Park, Brooklyn; *Only You Will Recognize the Signal*, a serial space opera performed live over the internet; *Looking at You*, a techno-noir featuring live datamining of the audience and a chorus of 25 singing tablet computers; *all decisions will be made by consensus*, a short absurdist opera performed live over Zoom; and *The Parkville Murders*, the world’s first virtual reality opera.

As a performer, Kamala has been hailed as “an impassioned soprano with blazing high notes” (*Wall Street Journal*). A frequent collaborator with Anthony Braxton, she has premiered his operas *Trillium E* and *Trillium J*, as well as appearing on his 12-hour recording *GTM (Syntax)* 2017. Other notable collaborations include Meredith Monk’s *Atlas* with the LA Philharmonic, The Wooster



Group’s *La Didone* (Kaaithheater, Brussels; Edinburgh International Festival; Rotterdam Schouberg; Grand Théâtre de la Ville, Luxembourg; St. Anne’s Warehouse, NY; REDCAT, Los Angeles), and the PROTOTYPE Festival’s production of her composition *Thumbprint* (Baruch Performing Arts, NY; REDCAT, Los Angeles). Kamala is the leader of Bombay Rickey, an operatic Bollywood surf ensemble whose accolades include two awards for Best Eclectic Album from the Independent Music Awards, the 2018 Mid-Atlantic touring grant, and appearances on WFMU and NPR. Awards, grants and residencies: Jonathan Larson Award, NEA ArtWorks, MAP Fund, Opera America, HERE Artist Residency Program, the MacDowell Colony, and the Watermill Center.

Dr. Sankaram holds a PhD from the New School and is currently a member of the composition faculty at SUNY Purchase.

<http://www.kamalasankaram.com/>

Jerre Dye, librettist

Jerre Dye is a librettist, playwright and director. Some of his work in opera includes the upcoming *Woman with Eyes Closed* for Opera Philadelphia with composer Jennifer Higdon; *Taking Up Serpents* for Washington National Opera with composer Kamala Sankaram; *The Transformation of Jane Doe* for Chicago Opera Theatre with composer Stacy Garrop; *The Falling and The Rising* for the U.S. Army Field Band and Chorus, Arizona Opera, San Diego Opera, Opera Memphis, Seattle Opera, Seagle Music Colony and Texas Christian University with composer Zachary Redler; *Pretty Little Room* for Opera Memphis with composer Robert Patterson; *Parkville*, a filmed, episodic, VR opera for Opera On Tap/New York with composer Kamala Sankaram; *Summer Place* for Chautauqua Opera and *Ghosts of Crosstown*, an opera cycle for Opera Memphis with composers Zachary Redler, Kamran Ince, Nathaniel Stookey and Jack Perla. His plays include *Cicada*, *Distance*, *Short/Stories*, *Threads*, *The New Adventures of Hansel and Gretel*, *Wild Swans*, *Live Studio Audience* and an adaptation of Stravinsky’s *A Soldier’s Tale* with Iris Orchestra. He is currently writing *Self Storage* in collaboration with Zachary Redler. Dye is the recipient of the Award for Dramatic Literature from the Fellowship of Southern Writers.



Listen

Chicago Opera Theater produced a recording of [*Taking Up Serpents*](#) in conjunction with its 2020 production.

Last year, Glimmerglass produced a digital companion to [*The Jungle Book*](#), featuring artwork by Tharanga Goonetilleke and excerpts from the opera by Sankaram and Kelley Rourke.

[*Thumbprint*](#), a 90-minute contemporary opera-theatre work by Sankaram and Susan Yankowitz, is inspired by the experiences of Mukhtar Mai, the first female victim of gang rape to bring her male attackers to justice in Pakistan.

[*Miranda*](#) is a 60-minute steampunk murder-mystery chamber opera in which the six instrumentalists play, sing, and act all the parts. Through a lush score inspired by diverse genres such as Baroque opera, Hindustani music, tango, hip-hop, and found-sound audioscapes, *Miranda*’s story unfolds in song, sound, movement, video, and dialogue.

Sankaram is a member of [*Bombay Rickey*](#), a five-piece band with a unique sound evocative of 1960s movie soundscapes. The group plays both covers and original music that borrow equally from the worlds of surf rock, cumbia, spaghetti-Western, and Bollywood, balanced out with soaring operatic vocals.

Synopsis

On New Year's Eve in Gulf Shores, Alabama, 25-year-old Kayla stands outside the Save Mart drug store on a break from her marathon evening shift. Her co-worker, Reba, stands at a distance finishing a cigarette and checking Facebook on her phone. As Kayla watches, moths circle the parking lot street lamps. The endlessly circling moths stoke an old spiritual longing inside of Kayla. She questions choices in her life and whether leaving home to find herself was worth the spiritual risk. In her uncertainty, she asks God for guidance. As she does this, a vision appears inside Kayla's head. She witnesses a distant memory – her younger self carrying a box used for catching snakes for religious purposes. The fleeting vision disappears.

Back inside the Save Mart, monotony begins to eat away at Kayla. As she cleans up a spill on aisle thirteen, a second vision appears. She finds herself inside her childhood church. Kayla's father takes the pulpit and preaches in all his glory. Swept up inside joy and fear, Kayla bears witness. Overcome by the Holy Spirit, Kayla's mother, Nelda, speaks wildly and magnificently in tongues. The memory is electric.

A phone call to the Save Mart interrupts Kayla's vision. Nelda is on the line. She shares the news that Daddy has been bitten by one of his rattlesnakes in a church service and is dying in the hospital. Nelda laments defying her husband's wish not to bring him to the hospital. She invites Kayla to say her goodbyes. She hangs up. Kayla quits her job and begins the long journey home.

As Kayla gathers her things, she is once again transported to her childhood – a New Year's Eve from long ago. Fireworks burst in the sky as her Daddy, drunk and unpredictable, carries a bottle of bourbon and a bag of bottle rockets. He mocks his wife's concerns of safety. "You ain't scared at all, are ya?" he challenges Kayla. "I ain't scared-a anything," she replies. Throwing bottle rockets into the sky, Daddy shouts in desperation at the heavens. He screams in defiance of God's judgment. Broken open, he falls to his knees, sobbing, begging God for salvation. Nelda gathers her transformed husband up into her arms and leads him back to the car. Meanwhile, Kayla stands alone in the empty field of her memories. Her vision, once again, fades.

On the Greyhound bus headed home, Kayla begins to hear the thoughts of the other passengers – each one filled with loss and longing. Together, they pray for deliverance. Yet another vision appears. Nelda appears in the back of the darkened Greyhound bus. She speaks in tongues, as Kayla slowly opens her suitcase. She begins pulling earth and roots from inside. A rattlesnake hisses deep inside the suitcase as Daddy appears once again. This vision has landed Kayla at Burkett's Creek, the place where Daddy catches rattlesnakes for religious purposes. He commands Kayla to pin a rattlesnake with a snake stick. Kayla hesitates, afraid. Ripping the stick away, Daddy shouts, "Weak as water! Weak as Eve!", blaming sinful women for the downfall of humanity. Desperate to escape this fate, Kayla cries, "I want to preach the word, like you." Daddy slaps her. The vision fades. (*Continued...*)



Kayla arrives at the hospital. Nelda gives her daughter the cold shoulder. Kayla attempt to explain why she had to leave home. Nelda laments her husband’s slow and painful demise. She prays over his comatose body, tormented by her desperation to save her husband and her shame at having defied God’s will. The two women reckon with Daddy’s concurrent grandeur, misdeeds, and cruelty. They reach for meaning inside uncertainty, grief, and anger.

Kayla departs the hospital, stepping into a final vision. All the previous visions collide inside her mind– the church, the fireworks, Burkett’s Creek. Simultaneously, Nelda speaks in tongues, praying in desperation for God’s assistance at Daddy’s bedside. As Kayla reckons with the spiritual awakening inside of her, Nelda gets the answer she’s been praying for. Nelda crosses to Daddy’s bedside and covers his face with a hospital pillow. Daddy shudders and fades. Meanwhile, the magnitude of Kayla’s final vision unleashes an inner healing. For the first time, Kayla embraces the glory of the light within. Daddy is dead. Kayla is transformed.



*Page 3: Taking Up Serpents at Chicago Opera Theater, 2021.
Above: The world premiere at Washington National Opera, 2019.*

Jesus therefore said to him, “Unless you see **signs and wonders** you will not believe.”

John 4:48

He delivers and rescues, he works **signs and wonders** in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.

Daniel 6:27



“GOD GETS IN THE CRACKS OF THINGS”

BY KELLEY ROURKE | INTERVIEWS BY NICK RICHARDSON

The inspiration for *Taking Up Serpents*, which had its premiere at Washington National Opera in 2018, comes straight from librettist Jerre Dye’s childhood in northeast Mississippi. “We grew up as straightforward, relatively boring Methodists,” says Dye, “but when I was about seven, we joined a church founded by a family friend called Good News Bible Church. This was my introduction to ecstatic worship. Suddenly, I was exposed to speaking in tongues, people playing tambourines, faith healing, prophecy. It was both jarring as a kid and also amazing ... bodies in motion, hearts, minds, and voices alive inside an electrifying and deeply intimate religious space. It was transformative for me. It completely captured my imagination as a child. I grew up in that church for the lion’s share of my childhood. I always joke that although we didn’t handle snakes ourselves, we definitely knew people who did. Some years later, we moved and our family re-entered the Methodist world of my early childhood. I was suddenly left with an empty feeling, a great sadness, a sense of disconnect. All the wonder and awe had vanished.”

SIGNS AND WONDERS

“And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”

Mark 16:17-18, New International Version

For more than 100 years, snake-handling has been a vital part of church services in some Appalachian congregations, in which every word of Mark 16:17-18 has the force of a commandment. “To me it’s as much a commandment from God when He said, ‘they shall take up serpents,’ as it was in the 10 Commandments when He said, ‘thou shalt not commit adultery,’” said Pastor Jamie Coots in National Geographic’s *Snake Salvation*, a 2013 documentary series following the lives of two congregations and their charismatic leaders. For practitioners, the “signs” are proof of the power of the Holy Spirit, and performing signs for all to see is an important component of a Christian’s calling.

The modern Pentecostal church traces its origins to Scottish minister Edward Irving (1792-1834), who preached about the activity of the Holy Spirit, and whose congregation was noted for the sign of speaking in tongues. In 1845, Phoebe Palmer’s *The Way of Holiness* described moments of instant sanctification. These ideas laid the groundwork for Pentecostal congregations, first distinguished by the “signs” of speaking in tongues and laying on of hands. It was not until around the first decade of the 20th century that George Hensley became curious about another “sign” mentioned in Mark 16:17-18 and took up serpents for the first time. Although he may not have been the first to do so, Hensley is credited with spreading the practice. For practitioners, this “dance with death” was and continues to be a powerful sign of the Holy Spirit at work in the world.

“ALL I EVER SAW WAS YOU”

By the early 20th century, the Holiness movement’s emphasis on unmediated individual experience (vs. conformity to a common doctrine) led, predictably, to an explosion of new denominations, each taking its inspiration from its pastor, frequently a larger-than-life figure.

“The inspiration for the Daddy character was a dance between Johnny Cash and my childhood pastor,” says Dye. “Testimony lives at the heart of this universe. You gotta sin to get saved. An electric salvation story is essential for both the believer and the congregation.”

Testimony slips between speech and song, and congregational singing and clapping (in addition to speaking in tongues) is all part of the powerful experience of a service. Sankaram drew on several influences to ground the opera in the world of these churches, including elements of praise band, honky-tonk guitar (specifically drawing inspiration from Bob Wills), and shape note singing. The score’s impressions of Daddy’s church services are lively and compelling; we understand, at a visceral level, the power his preaching held for his congregation, for Nelda and – for a time, at least – for Kayla.

Charismatic church leaders often become inseparable, in the public eye, from the faith they profess – for better and for worse. In the opera, Kayla is haunted by memories of Daddy’s behavior before his conversion as well as memories of more recent behavior that seems at odds with the Gospel he preaches. Ultimately, this causes her to question her relationship not only with Daddy, but with the church he leads.

“TETHERED TO THE MYSTERY”

In addition to grounding the opera in the sonic world of the Southern church, Sankaram strove to capture the mystery and magical realism of Dye’s libretto. “I drew on Christian mysticism to create musical ciphers that are hidden throughout the score. Numerology influences the time signatures – scenes based on the world of man are in 5, while those with divine influence are in 7. Much of the harmonic world of the piece is built on chords based on the overtone series and natural resonance. The libretto also works as a memory play, with rapid shifts in time. To capture this ambiguity, I used a lot of uncommon instrumental effects and percussion. Kayla’s retreat into memory is often signified by whirly tubes, which are plastic percussion instruments that are played by being swung in a circle. The guitar creates the sound of a heart monitor in the hospital scene, and the bassoon (played without its mouthpiece) creates the sound of a heartbeat. The percussionist also plays a waterphone, which is a metal instrument full of water with bowed spikes.”

Although the world of snake-handlers is very small and specific, Dye hopes aspects of Kayla’s journey will resonate with a broad audience. “I have to believe this faith journey, whether you are a person of faith or not, is a universal one. To stumble through life is to stumble through heartache. Grief is a teacher. It’s also a door. Stepping through is an act of faith. We’ve all been asked to step out of our lives and into some greater mystery.”

“THIS LONGING IS UNDOING ME”

Even after leaving her father’s church, Kayla feels something pulling her beyond this world, a calling she has felt since childhood. Moving in and out of memory, she re-experiences her father’s explosive rejection when, as a young girl, she tells him, “I want to preach the word, like you.”

This aspect of Kayla’s story is also rooted in Dye’s memories of his mother’s experience. “She was deeply involved in the church,” remembers Dye. “And in that world, women weren’t welcomed into the pulpit like men. There were some pretty strict gender roles upheld in those spaces. And yet, my mom was a born leader. It was what she was put on the planet to do. So it was painful for her at times. I would watch her struggle. She knew she had a calling, yet there was only so far she could take it. *Serpents* is inspired by that struggle, that frustration, that disillusionment.”

“WE WANDER THROUGH THE WILDERNESS”

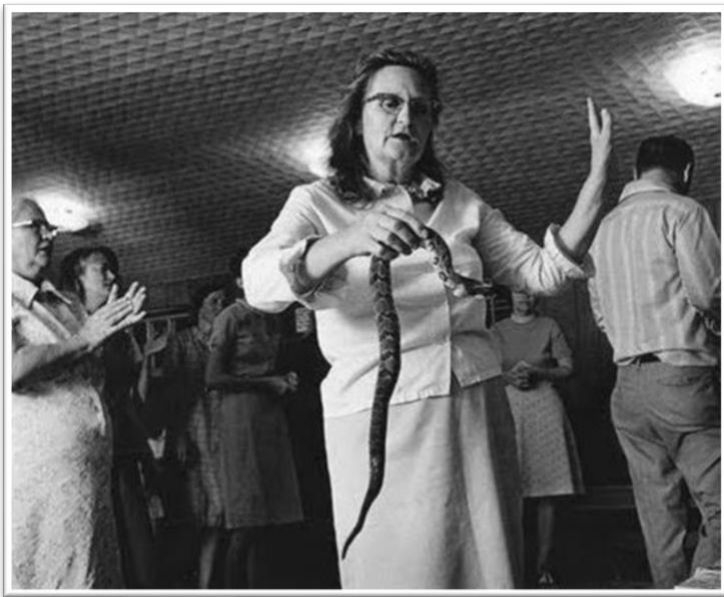
Snakebites during services, while rare, do occur. If handling snakes without being harmed is a sign of God’s power, what does a snakebite signify? Practitioners assign several interpretations to bites, most frequently ascribing them to human error: Snakes may be handled only when one is “under anointment,” a state that comes and goes. Believers are called to represent their power over death when – and only when – they are suffused with the Holy Spirit. Instances of snakebites during service tend to be attributed not to God’s impotence, but to an individual’s poor judgment and hubris. Some have further argued that occasional snakebites serve an important evangelical purpose. David G. Bromley, Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, points out that “a certain number of burn and bite events are functional in demonstrating contingency” and reminding both believers and nonbelievers of the natural laws that most snake-handling transcends. Finally, a snakebite is an opportunity to demonstrate one’s faith in God by refusing medical help, as Daddy tries to do in the opera.

While a strictly literal interpretation of Mark 16:17-18 may seem incomprehensible to some, it was important to Sankaram and Dye to present both the logic and the faith that guide the opera’s characters. “We worked really hard to frame our characters in a generous way,” says Dye. “It was important to capture something beyond sensational fanaticism. We wanted to reveal human beings engaged in a heartfelt struggle for redemption and salvation.”

Musical Influences

“When working on the score for *Serpents*, I knew that there were a couple of important things the music needed to accomplish. First, because the piece had to be one act, the music needed to immediately tell us something about the characters and the world they inhabit. To ground us in the world of the Southern church, I use elements of praise band, honky tonk guitar (specifically drawing inspiration from Bob Wills), and shape note singing, which is an early form of hymnody. The second thing I wanted to do was the capture the mystery and magical realism of Jerre Dye’s libretto. I drew on Christian mysticism to create musical ciphers that are hidden throughout the score. Numerology influences the time signatures— scenes based on the world of man are in 5, while those with divine influence are in 7. Much of the harmonic world of the piece is built on chords based on the overtone series and natural resonance. The libretto also works as a memory play, with rapid shifts in time. To capture this ambiguity, I used a lot of uncommon instrumental effects and percussion. Kayla’s retreat into memory is often signified by whirly tubes, which are plastic percussion instruments that are played by being swung in a circle. The guitar creates the sound of a heart monitor in the hospital scene and the bassoon (played without its mouthpiece) creates the sound of a heartbeat. The percussionist also plays a waterphone, which is a metal instrument full of water with bowed spikes.”

—Kamala Sankaram



Listen

Shape Note Singing

Shape notes provided a path to reading music for those without formal musical training, beginning around the turn of the nineteenth century. Church singing schools served a number of complementary purposes in rural communities; they offered an entry level musical instruction; they provided social interaction; drew people closer to the church.

Bob Wills is considered the founder of Western Swing; he was inducted to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1968.

“Bob Wills was more than a legendary performer. He was a man from the sharecropper’s fields who understood middle America’s hardship, sweat and pain. He was a favorite son who had somehow fought his way to the top.”

— Dwight Adair

And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; **they will pick up serpents**, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.

Mark 16:17-18

Pentecostalism in America

Pentecostalism began on the American frontier, and it has become one of the largest expressions of global Christianity. In less than a century, it has grown to hundreds of millions of adherents. Today, Pentecostalism is pan-denominational. There are charismatic Catholics and Lutherans, unaffiliated Pentecostal communities, and established Pentecostal traditions, most prominently the Assemblies of God. In a [2008 episode of On Being](#), Krista Tippett spoke with a theologian, Robert Franklin, about the rise of Pentecostal worship among African-Americans in every denomination; and a sociologist, Margaret Poloma, on her study of modern day Pentecostals.

“And certainly post-Enlightenment humanity has been so devoid of feelings, of opportunities for catharsis, and yet I truly believe that we, as human beings, are wired in such a way that we do require these kinds of responses, not only emotional response but even physical responses. And I think at one time, certainly religion could provide that. It certainly does in other cultures, but in our own culture, I think that much of our faith is an intellectual exercise, particularly for those of us who are more scholarly. We’ll make it a matter of belief: Does it make sense? Is it rational? When this kind of a movement happens, it doesn’t even make sense to ask those kinds of questions.”

—Margaret Poloma



And I will show wonders in the heaven above
and signs on the earth beneath,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
the sun shall be turned into darkness
and the moon into blood,
before the day of the Lord comes,
the great and manifest day.

Acts 2:18-20

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began *to speak in other tongues*, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Acts 2:1-4



From Spiritual Practice to Corporate Team-Building

Each May in the small Greek village of Lagadas, a group of celebrants upholds a three-day tradition that incorporates a range of age-old rites, including walking on [hot coals](#).

The practice of may have its roots in ancient Greek celebrations of Dionysus; according to local lore, when the church of Constantine and Helen caught fire, hundreds of years ago, voices of the saints were heard pleading for help; when villagers entered the burning building to rescue the saints’ icons, neither they nor the icons were harmed. Seemingly unrelated traditions also exist in [Bali](#), [Fiji](#), [India](#) and [Japan](#).

In recent years, fire-walking has been part of motivational seminars given by Tony Robbins, and companies including [Burger King](#) have featured the event at corporate retreats. Earlier this month [more than two dozen employees of a Swiss company were injured](#) at a similar event.

Glossary

Beelzebub: A name for the devil; in Mark 3:22, Jesus is accused of driving out demons by the power of Beelzebub.

Birth of sin: The world was free of sin until Eve disobeyed God and took a bite of an apple – the “first” or “original” sin. See “weak as eve.”

Calling: The God of both the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels called humans to act in his name. According to the [Online Etymology Dictionary](#), the sense of the word as “vocation, profession, trade, occupation” (1550s) traces to I Corinthians vii.20.

Faithful servant: In a parable that appears in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus compares God the father to a master who rewards his “faithful servant” for multiplying his gifts.

Forty days and forty nights: The duration of many important events in the Bible, including the great flood; Moses’ time on Mount Sinai; the time Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness.

Holy Ghost/Holy Spirit: The third person in the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit “appeared to [the apostles] tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” ([Acts 2: 1-4](#))

Lay your burdens down: A reference to Matthew 11:28-30: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Let there be light: In [Genesis](#), the words that signal the beginning of creation: “And God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.”

Lick the dust: According to Micah 7:16-17, when God reveals himself: “The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might; they shall lay their hands on their mouths; their ears shall be deaf; they shall lick the dust like a serpent, like the crawling things of the earth; they shall come trembling out of their strongholds, they shall turn in dread to the Lord our God, and they shall fear because of thee.”

Lion’s den: [Daniel 6:10-27](#). Daniel was thrown into the lion’s den and told, “May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!” When King Darius opened the den the next morning, he found that God had indeed protected Daniel, and the King praised God as a result: “...He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.”

Moths to the flame: Not all moths are attracted to light, and while [many theories have been posited](#) to explain why some species are, this behavior is ultimately a mystery.

Pentecost: Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit appeared to the disciples.

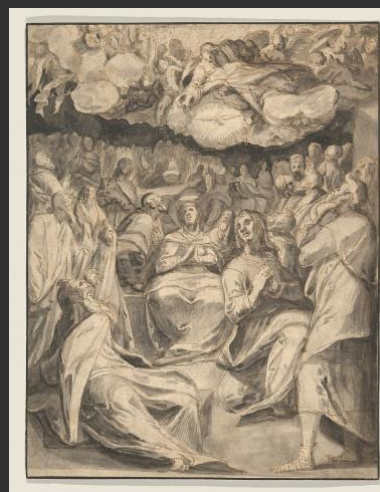
Pharisee: Member of an ancient Jewish sect, distinguished by strict observance of the traditional and written law, and commonly held to have pretensions to superior sanctity; in the Gospels, they have an adversarial relationship with Jesus.

(Continued on next page.)

Top left: Stained glass depicting the **birth of sin**. A serpent wraps around the tree between Adam and Eve.

Bottom left: *Daniel in the Lion’s Den* by Peter Paul Rubens, c.1614-1616.

Right: A sketch of **Pentecost** by the Master of the Egmont Albums, 16th c. Read about it at The Met’s [website](#).



Glossary (cont.)

The prodigal returns: The [parable of the prodigal son](#) tells how a man demanded his inheritance in advance, then left home and squandered it. When he returns, penniless and ashamed, he begs his father's forgiveness, saying "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your servants." Unlike the opera's Daddy, the father welcomes his son with open arms, much to the chagrin of the brother who stayed close to home.

Satan: In the Abrahamic religions, the prince of evil spirits and adversary of God.

Sulfur: The bible references fire and brimstone (an archaic term for sulfur) as God's punishment for sinners; sulfur is also a key component of fireworks.

Tammy Faye: Tammy Faye Messner (formerly Bakker) was an American evangelist, singer, author, talk show host, and television personality. She was noted for her eccentric and glamorous persona.

They know not what they do: In Luke 23:34, Jesus asks forgiveness for those who torture and ultimately kill him: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

Timber rattler: One of North America's most dangerous snakes, due to its size (30-60 inches), long fangs, and high venom yield. Here's a [clip](#) of Pastor Andrew Hamblin handling a timber rattler from National Geographic's series *Snake Salvation*.

Unhinged jaw: Reference to snakes' ability to open their mouths extremely wide. (Contrary to popular lore, snakes do not actually dislocate their jaws to do this.)

Weak as Eve: Suggesting Eve's susceptibility to the serpent's temptation is the cause of all sin in the world, and that all women share her weak and sinful nature.

More on Snake Handling

National Geographic brought critical attention to snake handling with its TV series *Snake Salvation*. You can stream the full season (at a price) on [Amazon](#) and [YouTube](#). Here's a [free clip](#). [TIME Magazine](#) previewed the show before it premiered, in conversation with professors of religion.

Before the National Geographic show, [CNN](#) profiled Pastor Andrew Hamblin and the practice of snake handling.

Snake handling is outlawed in some U.S. states, which limits Americans' freedom of religion. Middle Tennessee State University outlines legal disputes on this topic in its [First Amendment Encyclopedia](#).

National Geographic [reported](#) last year that some snake handlers are now turning to modern medicine after a series of high-profile deaths in their communities. (This article also has wonderful photographs!)

Another useful (and fascinating) resource is journalist Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*, first published in 1995. It was a National Book Award finalist.

*Clockwise from top left: Tammy Faye with her first husband, Jim Bakker. They were once America's most famous televangelists with their own TV channel and amusement park. The timber rattlesnake is not aggressive, but can be deadly when provoked. William Blake's *Eve Tempted by the Serpent*, painted from 1799 to 1800, depicts a dragonsque snake encouraging "weak [as] Eve" to pick the apple. A snake's jaws move independently and are attached to each other by ligaments, not bone (like in mammals).*

