

Such a strange story we have in our Old Testament reading this morning. The Israelites are complaining – well no that's not strange. What is strange is that God sends snakes to bite the Israelites. This may sound very cruel on God's part. I like the interpretation offered by Rev. Adkins-Whitesides<sup>1</sup>. She writes - as the rabbis interpret the story, God decides that since his people do not appreciate his care and protection, he will take it away. And the vipers and snakes that have been in the desert with them all along now begin to bite the Israelites and kill them. The Israelites are not just complaining about the food. They are speaking against God. They are not trusting God.

The Israelites beg Moses to ask God for help and he does. God listens to Moses' plea and gives this very strange instruction. Moses is to make a snake out of bronze and place it on a pole. If the people look up at the snake on the pole when they are bitten, they will not die. The image of their destruction becomes what saves them.

The reason we hear this Old Testament reading today is because Jesus makes reference to it in our gospel reading. *"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up."* And here is where it gets stranger in Jesus's linking his teaching of the Son of Man being lifted up back to this old testament story. *Debie Thomas<sup>2</sup> writes* "What an odd comparison, the loving, saving Messiah to the bronze replica of a poisonous snake. What does it mean? Why doesn't God just make the snakes go away? Why does God have them gaze without flinching at the monstrous thing their sin has conjured. It's the thing they have wrought, the thing they fear most, the thing that will surely kill them if God in God's mercy doesn't intervene and transform the instrument of pain and death into an instrument of healing and life. In order to be saved, the people have to confront the serpent — they have to look hard at what harms, poisons, breaks, and kills them."

Why does Jesus compare his lifting up to Moses lifting up the serpent? Perhaps it is that our healing, our eternal life, is found in the lifting up of the Son of Man, in Jesus' resurrection. For me, the symbol of the Son of Man being lifted up is found in the cross. Someone once told me that wearing a cross around my neck was the same as wearing a model of an electric chair. After some thought I agreed with her.

The cross on which people were crucified is a symbol of that one of the most painful means of execution at that time. The cross also represents the worst of what human beings can do when they sin - betrayal, greed, jealousy, not wanting to change what was wrong, and the misuse of power. And yet, our very salvation, forged in the love of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Kristin-Adkins-Whitesides-Fourth-Sunday-in-Lent-March-14-2021.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2944-looking-up>

God, has been given through the cross, an undeniable expression of all that Jesus taught. For us, the cross is a symbol of hope, a reminder of Jesus' presence with us, of his love that knows no bounds.

Thinking of how the Israelites had to look up at the metal snake for their healing – the very thing which was causing their pain - we might consider how our relationship to our own salvation might shift, if we were to take an honest accounting and accountability of our sins, rather than expediently handing them to God.

Perhaps being willing to see where we have gone wrong is part of our healing. We can see our sin in the symbol of the cross and we can experience our healing in it as well. The process of deep and honest reflection on our sins, not for the purpose of our salvation, but for the purpose of living fully into God's healing love, brings power to the act of lifting our eyes to the empty cross. What sin do we need to take a look at in order for us to be healed?

On this anniversary of us going into quarantine and still living with many COVID restrictions, I believe we have a lot in common with the Israelites. We have been wandering in a different type of wilderness. Like them we have not known where we are going, or how long it will last. Like them, many of us have questioned where God is. We have not trusted God and fallen into despair. I remember that Saturday as I posted the signs that the church buildings were closed wondering if this was going to be the collapse of St. Peter's? How was our community going to work if we couldn't gather for worship in our building? I had to intentionally work to see where God was showing up. Even so there were many moments of fear and worry as the death toll went up and we dealt with a virus that we didn't understand or know how to treat.

As I look back, it is clear that God has been with us all through this. While there has been great cost in lives, lingering health issues for some, loss of jobs and more, God has been there. We have worshiped. We have served those in need. We have studied scripture. We have prayed at home. In our world, health care workers have gone above and beyond. Stimulus checks have been sent out. The scientists have come up with a vaccine in record time. Many blessings have been poured on St. Peter's and this world. **God** has been with us in the midst of this mess.

And yet a year later, we are still in this wilderness with plenty of opportunities to complain. Many cannot get an appointment for a vaccine, health workers are exhausted, jobs are still scarce, and businesses are struggling. Look at those places where we doubt God, where we are in despair, the lonely places, and the 'exhausted just can't go on another moment' places. See the cross in those places. See it standing there reminding us that Jesus in his moment of suffering on the cross has been to all those places. And remember the healing of God – the same healing that protected the Israelites from the snake bites and the same healing that is provided to us each and every day. We have some more to go in this pandemic, but we have come a long way and we are beginning to see the end. Let God's healing and restoration continue to walk you through this time. Trust in God. God is always there.