

The people became impatient. I don't know about you but I have certainly become impatient. It's been a year. Enough already. How much longer will be in this wilderness of Zoom? How much longer before we can once again gather safely indoors to share the eucharist?

I don't know the answers to those questions. I have become impatient. The poisonous snakes have been biting for a year and we are still looking and waiting for God to deliver us. And we get to trust that that is actually happening - there are signs all around us - many of us are getting vaccinated, the infection rate is dropping locally and nationally. And yet we also know that this is far from over - new variants are developing which may be resistant to the vaccines we have.

Moses prayed. And God's answer was to tell him to have the people look at an image of the snake, one made of bronze. If they looked at it, they would be saved - they would not die from the snake venom. This is a strange story but it is an important one for us because Jesus referred to it in talking about his own death; it is one of the ways that, in John's account, Jesus helped his disciples to understand his coming crucifixion. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," he said, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

There's something here about seeing clearly. The people of Israel were saved by looking at what was biting them. When Jesus was crucified, humanity had to look clearly at its own behavior. A completely innocent man was executed because of the human tendency to hide from its own fear by scapegoating, by ganging up on someone who is different.

In this past year, we have been confronted with some of our own inherent tendencies toward scapegoating. In the past year we have been made to look anew at the dynamic of racism on which this nation is founded. Yesterday marked the one year anniversary of Breonna Taylor's death - a black woman shot by white police officers in her own apartment. And the trial of Derek Chauvin, the police officer accused of kneeling on George Floyd's neck for eight minutes, in its opening stages. And we wonder if anything has changed.

The people become impatient.

But something has changed. When I say the names Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, you know who I mean. Black lives have been lifted up in a new way in our national conversation. Racism has been raised up in our consciousness. No it's not enough, it's not changed the fundamental inequities of our society, but it is a change. When Ellen deGeneres came out as lesbian it was a game changer for gay and lesbian rights. Because now it was in your face. And gradually many people changed their attitude, and laws were changed so that in most places in this country gay people no longer have to hide. Queer bashing still happens but it is no longer acceptable in the shadows. Having Oprah Winfrey on television has not of course changed the racism of our society but the increasing inclusion of Blacks and other minority people in the media and in politics is changing how Americans think of themselves.

Racism and inequality is being lifted up and gradually those sins are being acknowledged and gradually healing will happen. Even in this very white and privileged community, change is coming. But as the followers of Jesus who ate with sinners and prostitutes, we get to be actively involved. How? We do what Moses did, we pray. We pray for a

just society where all people are treated with respect and all have equal opportunities. But we also work for it - we choose to read books which give us a different perspective, both fiction and non-fiction; we watch movies which portray racism and ones which raise up the lives of non-whites; we support organizations working for civil rights; and if we have investments we invest in companies that are working to positively impact the lives of minority peoples.

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.” There are three meanings here and I think all three are valid. First, that Jesus must be lifted up on the cross - a pole, just like the serpent; second that Jesus, the Son of Man, must be lifted up in resurrection; and thirdly that Christ is lifted up in glory, both by the hand of God and also by our worship. The elevation of the serpent brought life to the Israelites; the elevation of the Son of Man brings ongoing life to humanity.

The term the Son of Man first appears in a vision in the book of the prophet Daniel; it may be understood as Messiah. So Jesus the Messiah, the Christ must be elevated in order that eternal life may be made available, just as the snake on the pole made mortal life available to those who looked. They had to look. And we have to take action as well. Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection brings eternal life, but we have to engage with it and make it our own.

We get hung up, at least I do, on the word “believe”. An alternative sense of the Greek word would be to “have confidence in”. It requires our turning toward God and having confidence in the Son of Man for us to begin to enter into eternal life.

In the next two weeks we turn our faces toward Jerusalem and the coming devastation of Holy Week when Jesus is victimized and ultimately nailed to the cross. I don't especially want to look at it. I don't want to walk the Via Dolorosa; I don't want to see the pain and suffering of the Son of Man as he is strung up. I'd rather move on - let's get to Easter already. The people are impatient.

And yet somehow I think today's Gospel is saying no, you have to look. Acknowledge the pain and the suffering of the world. Don't turn off the radio thinking "I can't take any more"; don't flip past the stories of brutality in Myanmar and Tigray; don't ignore the numbers of those who have died in this pandemic. Acknowledge the hatred, the pain and suffering of the world and then see God joining in: God actively engaging all that hatred and pain. Have confidence that just as the bronze snake was a healing balm for the ancient people, so the Son of Man is a healing salve for all of creation.

Have confidence in the God who joins with us in our humanity and who raised Jesus from the dead; lift the Son of Man up in your heart and in your life. As you elevate Christ in worship, you will find that you too are elevated, that you too experience eternal life here and now.