

About a week and a half ago, by the Grace of God, I got an email around 10:00 at night. The email said that my name had come up on a list and that I was eligible to receive a vaccine in Bastrop. I read the email several times. It came from Eventbrite, a site that I was used to using to buy concert tickets. I thought, “Is this real or is it a scam?” After doing some digging I determined that it was the real deal. I jumped at the chance and signed up right away, you see, I assumed that I would have to wait several more months. I got the email on a Wednesday night and on Thursday afternoon I was pulling into the parking lot of a performing arts center in Bastrop. The volunteers that greeted me were so courteous, I even ran into a fellow Episcopal priest who had come from Austin to volunteer. From the time I arrived to the time I was sitting in that chair getting my first dose of the Moderna vaccine, it took about 15 minutes and at the end the army of kind volunteers were saying to us “congratulations” and all of the sudden I became deeply moved. I was moved by all of the people with their God-given abilities to make this happen. All of the volunteers who were driving from half an hour away to help strangers get vaccinated, even if they themselves,

were not yet eligible. As I sat socially distanced in the auditorium for 15 minutes of observation, my mind began to think about all of those saints in white labcoats, whose names we will never know, who used their God-given gifts and their own dogged determination to develop these vaccines in record-breaking time. These saints in working around the clock, late into the night, doing the research, performing the clinical trials, in the end will have saved the lives of millions of people. There will not be statues of them made, we will not recognize their names, and yet, millions of people around the world will have their lives spared because of their efforts. After my 15 minutes of waiting I got up and drove home—my arm was a little sore for a few days, but apart from that, I haven’t felt better or more hopeful in a year and I can’t wait to get my booster in a couple weeks.

A vaccine is kind of an extraordinary thing. One medical website describes it this way, “A vaccine forces your immune system to make antibodies against a specific disease, usually with a dead or weakened form of the germs. Then, if you come into contact with them again, your immune system knows what to do.” I was thinking about the

vaccination process this week when I was pondering our mysterious readings, because, antivenom, which is used to treat snake bites, works in a very similar way. In order to produce the antidote to venom, scientists have to “milk” snakes, they take their fangs and collect their venom, scientists are then able make antibodies that can then be used to counteract the venom in a person’s body.

Now, don’t know what the process was in the wilderness of Edom, when the rebellious Israelites were being bit right and left by a host of mysterious serpents, but it is significant to me that Moses is asked by God to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, such that those who had been afflicted with the terrible venomous bite of these snakes would look upon the image of the creature that bit them and live. Some rabbis and scholars have suggested that this mysterious Rod of Moses, may have inspired the Greek symbol of the Rod of Asclepius which came about around the same time that the book of numbers was written, is still used today as a symbol of healing and healthcare.

There is something amazing about the idea of being inoculated. A small amount something that could

have been fatal but has undergone a transformation so that it becomes the very thing that helps you defend against or withstand that which seeks to kill you.

This mysterious image of the serpent headed staff is borrowed by Jesus in the gospel lesson today when he is speaking with Nicodemus under the cover of night and foretells his crucifixion.

“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that in the same way that the Israelites looked upon the serpent and lived, so too God’s people will look upon Jesus’ abundant, loving sacrifice on the cross and live.

“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.”

In this way, the extraordinary layering of scripture is presented.

One Catholic commentator puts it beautifully,

“The lesson of the serpent rod of Moses blossoms into the promise that is the cross of Christ. The cross, in and of itself, was a symbol of the oppressive and deadly power of the Roman Empire. However, through God’s mercy, the cross also became the tree of life so that all who look upon it may be saved by God through Christ.” (Patricia Kasten)

The cross was such a symbol of terror that the first generations of Christians did not use it as a Christian symbol because so many of them were still being put to death by crucifixion, but the extraordinary mystery of the cross is that Jesus completed the sacrifice of his life upon it so that we mortal, broken, frail human beings might be inoculated from death and given the promise of New Life.

Our God so loved the world that he came and tasted death for us so that death itself might become a gateway for eternal life.

The God who loves you and created you, would not abandon you to a world of snakes and viruses, suffering and mortality, the God who created you has a love for you that cannot be quenched by death, a love so profound that his only begotten son

was lifted up so that you might live in new and abundant life. These are glad tidings indeed! Amen.