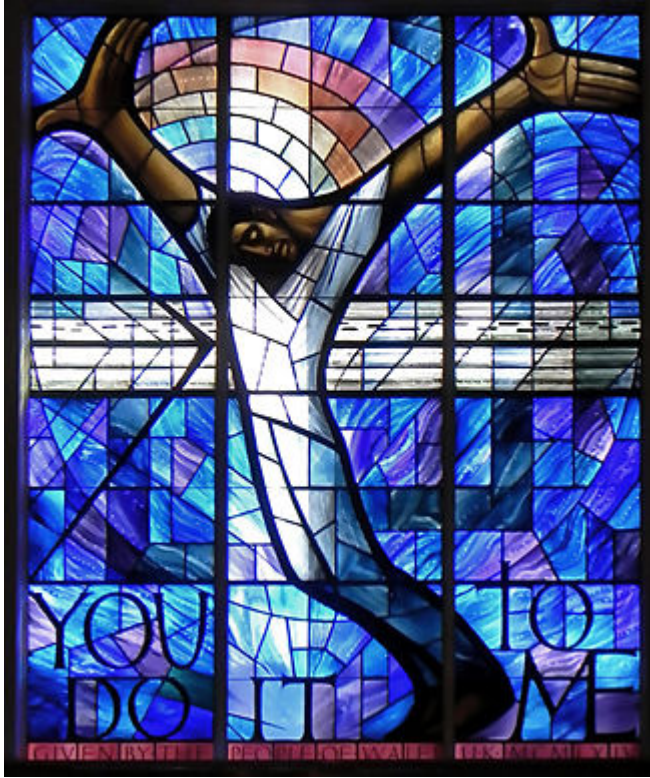


“Healing from Snakebite” by David Lloyd



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In our scripture from the book of Numbers, the Israelites were wandering through the desert. They weren't a unified community, but rather a combination of (1) Moses and Eleazar – Aaron's son, (2) the Levites, and (3) all the rest of the Israelites, who complained, "Why did you bring us from Egypt to die in the desert? We don't have bread, we don't have water, and the manna tastes disgusting!" God sent poisonous snakes among them. Many were bitten and some died. So the people apologized to Moses for speaking against God and against him and they begged him to ask God to take away the snakes. And Moses did.

Interestingly, the scripture doesn't say that God took away the snakes! It does say that God told Moses to make a snake of copper or bronze and erect it on a standard so that whoever had been bitten and looked at it would be healed. This symbol evokes the caduceus, the staff with the entwined serpents, an ancient Greek symbol of healing that is still the symbol of physicians. All around the world, snakes have represented fertility or a creative life force. Snakes shed their skin and so they are symbols of rebirth, of transformation, of immortality, and of healing.

Gazing upon the symbol of healing can prepare one's mind to be healed, and that mindset frequently helps healing begin. In the story, gazing on the bronze serpent reminded the Israelites that they had been bitten because they had been faithless, grumbling about their wilderness relationship with God. Seeing the bronze serpent reminded them that God is faithful to those who keep faith. Gazing upon the bronze serpent began the healing their broken relationship with God.

Americans have also been bitten by poisonous snakes, not just by the species that are part of the American wilderness, but by the poisonous snakes of racism and White supremacy that predated our country's founding. As early as 1494, two years after Columbus' arrival in the Caribbean, Catholic Spanish ship captains based in the Bahamas were kidnapping and enslaving Calusa Indians on the coast of Florida. In 1539 Hernando DeSoto's expedition to explore Florida and the lower Mississippi Valley enslaved Indian women for sex and both boys and men to be their guides and bearers. About halfway between Jacksonville and Tallahassee they massacred 200 of the Timucuan tribe. This was the first (but not last) massacre of indigenous people in what is now the United States. The next year in Alabama they massacred at least 2,500 – most of them women. The next year near what is now Albuquerque, Coronado's men massacred 250 Tigua people. Fifty years later, also in what is now New Mexico, the Spanish killed nearly 2,000 Pueblo

Indians.

But it wasn't just Catholic Spanish racism. In 1637 in Mystic, Connecticut Protestant English settlers and Indian allies killed between 400 and 700 Pequot Indians, most by burning them to death in their homes as they slept. Other massacres occurred in Protestant New Netherlands (New York) and Rhode Island, Anglican Virginia, North and South Carolina, and there were many more smaller massacres during the colonial period. Google "List of Indian massacres in North America," in *Wikipedia*. [\[i\]](#)

In 1619 the first African slaves were unloaded near Hampton, Virginia. In 1641, Puritan Protestant Massachusetts became the first colony to legally establish slavery. By 1664, 43% of New York City's population was enslaved. Some Quakers in Pennsylvania owned a few slaves each, including William Penn himself. All of the British colonies had enslaved people; by 1775 there were an estimated 4,100 enslaved people in the northern colonies, 127,200 in the Chesapeake and Delaware Bay regions, and 117,500 in the tidewater area (the "Low Country") of the Carolinas and Georgia. Shipyards in Boston and Rhode Island built ships to transport enslaved Africans through the Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade, while banking and insurance firms in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston financed the voyages. Plantations in New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the South exported rum and sugar to England. The first slave rebellion in the British colonies in North America occurred in New York City in 1712.

Our Constitution incorporated slavery in three provisions without ever using the words "slaves" or "slavery":

- Article I, section 2 apportioned congressional representation and direct taxation among the states by adding to the number of free persons, including indentured servants, but excluding Indians not taxed,

- three fifths “of all other persons;”
- Article I, section 9 prohibited Congress from banning the “migration or importation of such persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit” until 1808; and
 - Article IV, section 9 required a state to return a “person held to service or labour in one state, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another,” to be “delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labour may be due.”

Between 1788, pending ratification of the Constitution, and 1871, when Congress ended making treaties with Native American tribes, 366 treaties with Native American tribes had been ratified by the Senate. All of these have been broken either by private American citizens, despite clauses in which the federal government promised to punish non-Indians who broke the treaties (but did not), or by the federal government itself when it failed to live up to promises it made in the treaties. America has always been a racist country.

America was bitten by the poisonous snake of ethnic hatred since its beginning, too: the Irish, Italians, Poles, Hungarians, French Canadians, Chinese, Latinos and Latinas, and others have all experienced significant discrimination in the U.S. And Jews have always, always have experienced antisemitism and discrimination here.

The snakebites of racism and ethnic hatred have poisoned our political and social life as a nation. Our Seekers Racial and Ethnic Justice Ministry Team seeks:

to dismantle white supremacy and systemic racism in ourselves, in our faith community, in our nation and in our world, by better aligning our words and actions to the hopes and teachings of Jesus.

To me this means (1) helping bring about justice for those who

have been oppressed in our country because of their race and ethnicity, and (2) promoting healing for victims and oppressors of racial and ethnic hatred. But what can we do to achieve these goals?

The gospel for today may help us. In John's gospel, people had seen the signs and miracles Jesus was performing in Cana and in Jerusalem. Nicodemus, a Pharisee on the Jewish ruling council, came to Jesus at night and praised him as a teacher who had come from God. How did he know? Because only a person of God could perform the signs Jesus was performing. We don't know what Jesus actually said in Aramaic, but John wrote his gospel in Greek and in Greek Jesus' response can be translated in two different ways: "The truth of the matter is, unless one is born again, one cannot see the kingdom of God," or "The truth of the matter is, unless one is born from above, one cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus also claimed his divine nature – "What is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) is spirit." This totally befuddled Nicodemus and Jesus chided him for being a learned religious scholar but not understanding.

Then Jesus cited today's Hebrew scripture passage, which Nicodemus surely knew, but with a twist on it. In the passage from Numbers, the Israelites had looked up to see the bronze serpent and they didn't die. But here's the twist: just as the people looked up to see what Moses had lifted up, a lifeless symbol of something that could kill them but also heal them, the Chosen One (he, Jesus) would be lifted up – a euphemism known to mean death by crucifixion – so that everyone who believed in him would have eternal life, would be healed. And then Jesus added the familiar verse 16:

God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whosoever believes may not die, but have eternal life. God sent the Only Begotten into the world not to condemn the world, but that through the Only Begotten the world might be saved.

I have always misunderstood this verse. The Greek word *houtos* means "so" in the sense of "just so," or "in this way," or the more archaic, "thusly." One commentator has noted that we could translate John 3:16 as

"This is the way God loved the world, with the result that he gave his only Son, in order that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 is not about how much God loved the world. It is about in what way God loved the world.[\[ii\]](#)

Nicodemus sought the light of truth, but he came to Jesus by night and left confused, literally and figuratively still in the dark. Nicodemus must have kept track of Jesus, possibly even encountering him some additional times, because when we encounter Nicodemus again in the 7th chapter of John's gospel, his fellow Pharisees had sent Temple guards to arrest Jesus, but they didn't. When his fellow Pharisees then wanted to condemn Jesus, Nicodemus defended Jesus' right to a hearing before condemnation. We encounter Nicodemus one more time in the 19th chapter of John's gospel where he helped care for Jesus' body after the crucifixion. Nicodemus was no longer in the dark but had come to embrace the light.[\[iii\]](#) He had been a member of Jesus' most severe critics but had been born again. I think that gives us a sign of hope for our spiritual death, rebirth and healing.

Jesus had engaged, argued with, and persuaded people who slowly died to their old lives and were reborn into new lives as believers. Being born again is more than saying "I believe in Jesus," more than an emotional reaction. It is a life of actions that flow from that belief, totally trusting in God's love and grace. This is what the letter of James makes clear: if good deeds don't go with faith, faith is dead. We have to pick up our cross, we have to die to our current life of White privilege and end its power over us in order to be born again, to begin healing.

How do we face the snakebites of White racism and privilege? First, we must learn our nation's true history that includes the awful parts we were never taught. I've had to learn what I wasn't taught about American history. The good news is that there are books and essays in public libraries and online we can use to learn our history.

Second, we must do the harder work of exploring how White privilege has poisoned our own thinking and behavior. I'm still new at doing this and I confess that at times it makes me so uncomfortable. I know that this distress is a good sign, it's the birth pangs of being reborn, but it's tough. Here, too, there are also a number of books and articles to help us.

Third, we have to be willing to be vulnerable to our friends and colleagues who are people of color, to want them to call us out – I hope in a nice way – when we are unconsciously acting out of White privilege in a harmful way. I am probably unaware of most such occasions when I do this; maybe you are too.

Fourth, we can join people of color in political action to safeguard their rights and/or remedy past wrongs. This can take the form of signing petitions, writing to elected representatives, attending rallies, joining committees and doing the work without being in control, and, especially, voting in ways that promote the interests of people of color.

Fifth, and this is going to be really hard, we must be willing to give up control and power. In Seekers, this may take the form of modifying our process for domestic giving to include giving funds to nonprofit organizations led by people of color that do healing work with and for people of color but in which we have no discernable power, or even more challenging, giving funds to grass-roots programs led by people of color doing healing work with and for people of color that are not yet formal charitable organizations. It also means we will support affirmative action for and of financial reparations to Black

and Native Americans.

Sixth, we must pray, pray without ceasing, as Saint Paul urged. Praying for humility, praying that our ears and eyes and minds and hearts may open, praying for guidance, praying for courage – lots of courage, praying for strength for the long haul, praying for the love of God in Christ through the cross that forgives our sins.

Finally, we need to maintain our hope, a tough-minded hope, a blues hope, a gritty hope. In his book *Silencing White Noise*, Willie Dwayne Francois, III says,

Hope as an Americanized ideal and bourgeois shell of optimism fans the perpetuation of “good” for those in power, and perpetuation of suffering for victims of our racially divided history...We need a new version of hope, one that forges practices for engaging paralyzing challenges, uncomfortable exchanges, intense ideas, and the expectation of and stamina for progressive transformation. This hope is not a thin optimism. It registers more like blues hope, gritty hope. A blues hope honors the complexity of human personality, engagement and existence...Blues hope is an enduring capacity to survive the tragic every day. With gritty hope, the people of God claim the power to name, lean into, and then transcend the tragic character of life together.[\[iv\]](#)

James Baldwin once said, “Hope is invented every day.”[\[v\]](#) May it be so.

[\[i\]](#)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Indian_massacres_in_North_America

[\[ii\]](#) <https://www.bibleref.com/John/3/John-3-16.html>

[\[iii\]](#) Ibid.

[\[iv\]](#) Wille Dwany Francois III, *Silencing White Noise: Six Practices to Overcome Our Inaction no Race*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022) pp. 182pp.

[\[v\]](#) Cited in Eddie Glaude, *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Crown, 2020), 145.