

Back in the 1950s and 60s, during the civil rights era in this country, singing songs together kept marchers and protesters going in the face of angry and even violent opposition. A line in the refrain of one of those songs voiced this tenacity, this hope in the midst of struggle: “Hold on, hold on. Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.”

Keep your eyes on the prize. This refrain started sounding in my head as I thought about the Israelites keeping their eyes on the bronze serpent that Moses made and held before them in the wilderness. Keep your eyes on the prize – hold on. The refrain continued as I heard Jesus tell Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Keep your eyes on the prize – hold on.

I don’t know about you, but I need to hear this right about now, after the year we’ve had. As we trudge along in this wilderness, what we keep our eyes on matters. Whether we keep our eyes on the prize or whether we allow our gaze to drift toward other things, will make all the difference. Keeping our eyes on the prize, however, is not easy; sometimes because we don’t exactly know what the prize is, but more often because it is right there in front of us, and it is just too hard.

These Israelites – their story is so familiar, isn’t it, because pandemic or not, it is always our story. It is the human story with God. They have been brought out of slavery and oppression, but there’s so much more to it than just crossing the Red Sea. They have to keep following God through the wilderness, keep eating the plain manna God gives them, keep moving forward into unknown and strange territory. Even though God has been sustaining them, their complaint ignores this fact – they claim there is no food and water and they are going to die.

No food and water – except, of course, the manna that comes every day and the hordes of quail covering the ground and the water rushing out of the rock when Moses strikes it with his staff. They have everything they need – it just isn’t what they want. Their griping goes deep – they really don’t want to take this journey with God.

I think they are afraid. Their fear is deep, and it makes them furious. They are afraid of the salvation God offers. God is creating something new out of this people, asking them to let go of their old identities, the familiar things that made them comfortable. God is leading them on a new, uncertain path.

The serpents that attack them are, perhaps, a symbol of this fear of change. What gets translated in our version as “poisonous snakes” is rather different in the Hebrew – these are fiery serpents – fiery monsters – that go after the people. The people are killed by these fiery serpents – their fear destroys them.

What’s really interesting about this story is that the remedy is to make an image of the very serpents that have been attacking the people, and hold it up before their eyes. As long as they gaze upon this bronze

serpent on a pole, they will live. Perhaps they are being told to face their fear, to refuse to hide from the very thing that will kill them, in order to be saved.

What sense does this make? All the sense in the world. How often is it that salvation is found in coming face to face with the thing that is dangerous, that we fear most, the thing that we believe will destroy us?

Actually, it happens quite often. Vaccines are often made of the very disease they are created to protect against. The antidote to a snakebite is made from the very venom that can kill a person. In psychotherapy, we have to face the darkest parts of ourselves, the monsters in our past and in our own hearts, if we are to move toward healing. Keep your eyes on the prize – hold on.

In our journey with God, it is the same. At least I know it is this way with me. If we are honest, we see the truth about ourselves, which is that what God is asking of us on this journey is the thing we fear most. God is asking us to die to what we thought we were, and that feels like annihilation altogether.

I think that's what the Israelites were feeling – they realized that God was asking them to die to all they were before, to let it all go, and become something completely new, totally dependent on God and God's purposes, and it was terrifying. So God kept their eyes on the prize – the prize looked like death to them, but the stark reality of death to their old identity and ways was the only thing that would save them.

When Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,” I think he is keeping our eyes on the prize as well. He is keeping our eyes on the cross – on the thing we most fear.

Why should we fear the cross? Isn't the cross a symbol of salvation for us? Salvation yes, but a salvation that requires letting go of the selves that we have constructed for ourselves, in order to let God reshape us and completely remake us. No wonder the cross is something we fear. And yet we are called to keep our eyes on this prize.

Back in the year 1373, a thirty year old woman in Norwich, England, became gravely ill, so ill that she and everyone around her believed she was dying. Unable to move and in great pain, she prepared for death, and her priest was called to her bedside. He brought with him a crucifix, an image of Jesus suffering on the cross, and he held it up before this young woman's eyes. The light dimmed around her, but the crucifix was to her eyes in clear light, and she kept gazing upon it.

At one point she was tempted to look away, to focus not on the cross but on heaven, but something stopped her. She knew she had to keep her eyes on the cross; as she wrote later, “I chose Jesus for my heaven, in well and woe.” We know her now as Julian of Norwich, named after the parish church in which she spent the rest of her life as a hermit in solitude and prayer.



Eyes on the prize

March 14, 2021: The Fourth Sunday in Lent

The Rev. Dr. Elise A. Feyerherm

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She was sure, at that point, that she was dying. It would have been much easier to focus on heavenly rest, on comfort, but she knew that it was Jesus and the cross that would keep her anchored. Julian survived and lived at least another forty years – later she reflected on how we are always tempted to look for rest in things that we think will soothe us, in things that are not God, but she realized that there is rest only in God. But it was the cross that taught her that – she kept her eyes on the prize. She held on, even though she knew she would have to die to her old self.

There's a great paradox here – keeping our eyes on the prize of the cross, we look to a symbol of loss, not gain. Holding on is actually the biggest letting go of all.

Life with God means continual change and transformation – in our worship, in our ways of relating to each other, in our ways of serving the community, and in our own hearts. Can we look forward to the future God has in store, instead of to the past that is behind us? Can we face our fear of annihilation, name it for what it is, and let God take care of it? Can we stop worrying about what we've lost, or what we may lose, and let Jesus be our heaven, as individuals and as a community? Can we keep our eyes on the prize, and not hold on, but actually let go?

Amen.