

Hear this story written by a man named Dr. John Holbert.

“I know I have deep within me bigotries of countless kinds.

I am sixty-eight years old, and was raised in a time of "legal" segregation of the races, both African-American and Latino/a in the Phoenix, Arizona of my youth.

I first went to school with an African-American student when I was a senior in high school, age 17.

I am astonished when I consider that, given the world I now inhabit.

As a result of that history, I still have a deep fear and distrust of African-Americans.

I am not at all proud of this fact, but I must face the truth of it.

My wife was for three years one of the pastors of an African-American church; she and I were two of only five Anglo members of this 2000-member congregation.

I was the only Anglo member of the male chorus.

Did this cure my bigotry?

It did not –at least not completely.

It helped me, nudging me toward more openness, more willingness to see my fellow congregants as friends, rather than as completely different and thus strange, and unlike me.

What I thought might kill me became for me the way toward my healing.

But I have still much looking at the bronze serpent to do if I am to continue my healing.” (Holbert, John. “Of Snakes and Things...” [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com)).

Have you ever been in denial of something?

Maybe it was an attitude towards certain people, or an addiction, an inappropriate relationship, or an unhealthy behavior.

Whenever you found yourself thinking about that thing, even trying to crack open the door of self-reflection, did you immediately slam it shut, and turn the other way?

When someone mentioned \*that\* thing to you, did you deflect, defend yourself, or try to change the topic of conversation?

Did that thing continue to grow in your life, larger and larger, eating up more of your mental and emotional energy, affecting your relationships and just harming your overall wellbeing?

That’s the thing about denial, if you’re dealing with something life-threatening, it can literally kill you if you don’t address it.

But for most of us, denial isn’t that serious.

It can, however, prevent us from living into being our fullest selves.

It can cause us to lie or hide the truth from loved ones.

It can riddle us with guilt.

Denying a problem in our lives can harm us emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

The story we heard this morning was about a group of people who were in denial, who had to face their denial if they were going to heal.

The people were the Israelites.

Lead by Moses, they had been liberated from their slavery in Egypt.

Now they've been wandering around from place to place with Moses for 40 years, seeking the Holy Land, where they can put down roots.

This is another one of those times where the Israelites complained to God about their current state of affairs.

They were tired of the wandering and the roaming.

They whined and complained, 'Why did you take us out of Egypt to this godforsaken country?

There's no decent food, no water- we can't stomach this stuff any longer!"

When they were in Egypt, even though they were enslaved, they ate such decadent things as fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks and garlic!

In the desert, they'd been eating a lot of manna and they were tired of it.

Now we don't know if what happened next was a direct response to their complaining or if it was more of a coincidence, and maybe it just happened to take place after their complaining.

But needless to say, after they whined about the food and water, God sent poisonous snakes among the people and many of them died from snakebites.

The Israelites took this to mean that God was punishing them for being doubtful and unfaithful, so they appealed to Moses, "Please, talk to God, make the Lord take away serpents from us!"

So Moses, their go-between, did just that.

And God's response was to have Moses make a poisonous serpent,

(side note: God doesn't tell Moses what materials to use, but apparently there is bronze lying around, because that's his metal of choice).

So, Moses makes a serpent out of bronze, puts it on a pole, and anyone who is bitten by a real poisonous snake can just look at this serpent, and when they look at it, they will be healed, and they will live.

It seems that the plague of poisonous snakes was their punishment for not believing in God, for doubting God's protection.

So if the snake represents their sins, their lack of faithfulness, then they literally had to face their sins, look at the snake, and be healed.

The problem is that they took this a little too far.

The tool that God gave them for healing and restoring their faith, the snake, well, it became an idol.

Over time, they began to worship it.

They couldn't differentiate between the snake and God, after all, the snake is what healed them.

The Israelites forgot that it was YHWH who originally answered their prayers and sent them the snake in the first place.

What has the Bible taught us about false idols?

That they are bad and must be destroyed.

Remember the commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

Well, they had turned this serpent into a god, so, let's fast-forward to see what happened to this snake idol.

Two hundred and fifty years after Moses made the bronze serpent,

God's people have made it to the Promised Land (Israel), and it is now ensconced as an orthodox fixture in the holy of holies.

Then comes along King Hezekiah and he is a faithful man.

He is loyal to YHWH alone and has no time for these false idols.

So, he begins his plan of destruction.

He smashes Israel's altars to Baal and her fertility poles dedicated to Asherah, and then, as the book of 2 Kings tells us, *"[Hezekiah] removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole.*

*He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan."* (2 Kings 18: 4)

So the Israelites did what they were told, they faced their demons.

By turning towards the serpent, they acknowledged that they were unfaithful and doubted God.

But they came to idolize that which saved them.

They glorified it too much.

They placed too much value in it.

They replaced God with it, and so eventually, it had to go, thanks to King Hezekiah.

You might be thinking to yourself that God chose a really odd, and cruel way to teach the Israelites a lesson in faithfulness.

Remember that many of them had already died by the time God sent the healing snake-on-a-stick to them.

But maybe a lesson in here for us is that we have to face our demons in order to kick them, and not place so much trust in something that we think it will save us.

If you have a broken relationship, you deny it, then you face it, then you repair it, then you place all your trust in it and think it will save you.

If you are an addict, you deny it, then you admit it, then you go to 12 step meetings and become sober, then you place all your trust in those meetings and they become a religion.

Or maybe you are in a terrible job, one that's not life-giving, not meant for you, you might even be doing things that you think are immoral.

But it pays well and you're supporting your family.

So you deny the mismatch.

You ignore it for years until you can't anymore, and then you face the problem, you take the plunge and decide to switch careers.

Your new job is amazing, life-giving, you pour yourself into it, and you believe that it will save you.

Faithful ones, there is only one whom we should turn towards, who we should worship, who will save us, and that is, our brother, friend and savior, Jesus of Nazareth.

After all, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, *“And 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.”*

(John 3:14)

May we be courageous enough to turn towards the Cross and faithful enough to place all our trust in it. Amen.

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