

### 3.14.21 L4 Christ Looking Down

- Oxen have a reputation
  - I suspect that very few, or more likely NONE of us have ever driven a team of oxen
  - But you have seen pictures of these huge animals – often working in tandem and yoked together oxen pulled plows in the past, and still pull plows and wagons today
  - And oxen have a reputation for stubbornness
    - They seem to have a mind of their own
    - They are so strong, that it is hard to redirect and steer them if they try to veer off in a different direction
    - And that’s why the ox driver uses a prod to turn the ox’s stiff neck in the direction that he or she wants the ox to go
    - If you want to change the direction, you need to force the ox to turn its thick, strong, stiff neck in a new direction
- Now let’s be honest. People also have the same reputation
  - FIVE TIMES in the Old Testament, either God or Moses called the Israelites a STIFF-NECKED PEOPLE who despite being set from slavery in Egypt, and despite being rescued at the parting of the Red Sea, and despite being given Manna from heaven, birds from the air, and sweet water from the dry ground so that they would have enough to eat and drink – despite God lovingly providing all of this, the people rebelled against God,
  - And in the New Testament, in his sermon, Stephen called his listeners a stiff-necked people... and they responded by stoning Stephen to death
  - Stubborn... rebellious... so stiff-necked and unwilling to go in the direction that God desires – that is the reputation that humanity has earned in its relationship with God
- Now in today’s Old Testament reading we hear a story that is strange to our ears
  - While the people whom God had brought out of slavery in Egypt were wandering in the wilderness, they were impatient... they were ungrateful... and they complained, saying: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die

in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food. [Numbers 21:5]”

- And in that moment, God had had enough!
- But God did not destroy them all
- There in the wilderness God sent snakes into Israel’s encampment, and they started biting people and some of the people began to die
- So Moses prayed to God, and God showed mercy
- God instructed Moses to make a statue of a bronze serpent, mount it on the top of a pole, and raise and plant that pole up high so that the serpent on top could be seen by anyone throughout the camp
- And then, when someone was bitten by a snake, all they had to do to receive God’s mercy was to turn, and lift up their head, and look at the bronze serpent, and they would live
- All the stubborn, rebellious, stiff-necked people had to do, was to turn their necks, raise their heads, and live
- What could be simpler? What could be easier?
- But the rebellion of stiff-necked people continued on for century after century, so what more could God do?
- Once again, instead of destroying or wiping out the people, God took it upon God’s self to do what humanity in all its stubbornness and stiff-necked rebellion cannot do – God acted to save us
  - In the gospel for today, listen to Jesus describe what God has done: “***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. 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. [John 3:15-17]”
  - Jesus lifted up on the cross, replaced the bronze serpent of old as the source of God’s mercy
  - Jesus was lifted up on the cross on a hill outside of Jerusalem for all to see
  - And then from high upon the cross, instead of us LOOKING UP, Jesus the Christ LOOKED DOWN – Jesus

raised on the cross looked down and prayed for all humanity, saying: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. [Luke 23:34]”

- After the cross, we did not have to move our stiff-necks and look up to live... instead, after the cross, Jesus looked down on us and prayed for our forgiveness, Jesus died to crush snakes and serpents and the stiff-necked rebellion that we call sin, and Jesus was raised from the grave so that we would be given the gift of life

- The free gift, the grace of forgiveness and life frees us from the yoke of sin, and that free gift, that grace begins to loosen our stiff-necks

- Only with a loosened neck can we turn to God to give God our thanks and praise

- Only with a loosened neck can we turn to God to give our love, and offer our time, our talent, and our treasure

- And then only with a loosened neck can we not only turn to God, but we can also turn to each other – and we can even turn to strangers.

- Years ago the poet Bob Dylan wondered:

- And how many years can some people exist  
Before they're allowed to be free?

- Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head  
And pretend that he just doesn't see?

- Except the answer IS NOT blowing in the wind

- The answer is, God so loved the world by raising up Jesus before us, and we – we who now have necks loosened by the free gift of God’s loving grace, are called to love God, to love each other, and even to love strangers