

By Rev. Ryan J. Ogrodowicz  
VIC  
Text: John 3: 14-21  
Lent 4

### The Serpent and Jesus Lifted Up

“And 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.”

There are those who argue that there must be ways to heaven. That would mean humanity is free to choose its own personal path to a blissful afterlife. The first appeal of this belief is, simply put more people get into heaven, even if they've rejected Christ their entire life. The second appeal of this belief is that no longer does the Church need to exert so much labor and energy defending one faith when many beliefs are viable options. Third, martyrdom for one faith is foolish if others count before God, and fourth, one need not pay attention to the sins listed in Scripture if the Bible is just one holy book amongst many. Any universalistic worldview stating that God will save everyone regardless of their faith has a lot going for it in the eyes of our sinful flesh, who wants to be lazy, who refuses to make sacrifices, and desires sin and evil without the nagging prospect of having to face divine judgment. But this worldview cannot reconcile with what Scripture teaches, and that is God has set forth only one way to His eternal presence and that is by faith in Christ. Universal claims that all faiths, all beliefs inevitably lead to the same transcendent location in no way, shape or form harmonize with the words of the living God who says “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Faith in any god, any idol, any object would not have saved the Israelites in Numbers chapter 21. They had become impatient, angry, and thankless towards the gifts of God. They questioned even their departure from Egypt, thinking the great exodus from Egypt was now nothing more than a slow, wandering journey to death in an arid desert. They speak against God, they speak against Moses and so to get their attention and drive His people back to contrition and faith, God sends fiery serpents upon His people so that many die. Deadly, toxic venom flows through their arteries, and death is imminent. Faced with an enemy they cannot conquer, they confess and cry to their intercessor Moses, begging his prayers on their behalf for God to remove the slithering creatures of death. Moses prays, and God speaks, instructing His servant to set a metal serpent on a staff that comes with the divine promise that everyone bitten, when they gaze at that serpent on the staff, will live. At the very moment these people were searching for relief and crying for peace, looking at another god, gazing at another object, no matter how appealing it was to the eyes, would not have saved them. It was the serpent alone they were instructed by God to look at, nothing else. In the face of certain death, you don't want to find yourself just believing in whatever or whoever you want. We need certainty. We need assurance. We need salvation and we need to know where to find it. God was specific and clear: look at the serpent and you shall live, no other promise of life was given. It may have sounded foolish. It may have sounded stupid to the Israelites, the text doesn't say. But that was the gift and promise God gave. It was the only means of immediate healing and salvation for His stricken people. He graciously did it to save His people.

In the gospel lesson this morning, Jesus Christ uses this Old Testament account to talk about Himself. As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up on the cross so that people who believe in Him will have eternal life.

John 3:16 is that simple statement of the gospel you probably have memorized: For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. That verse doesn't only express the amount of God's love but also how He shows that love. The little word "so" that comes after God doesn't mean lots and lots; it means thusly, in this manner, in this way; for God in this manner loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son. The Father sends the gift of His Son Jesus Christ, and declares by believing in Him you do not perish but have eternal life. God's love is expressed and manifested for you in the giving of His Son, begotten, not created, not made. Jesus is of the Father, meaning He is divine in every way only He assumed into His divinity our flesh in order to bear our sin. So when He is fastened to the cross, don't think for a second you are gazing at just a man. The cross holds the Son of the Father, full of grace and truth, fully divine and fully human. As God in the flesh, this means He is able to bear the sin of the entire world, suffering as we do but also paying for all sin and redeeming us from death once and for all, a work that only God can do because Scripture says salvation belongs only to God.

It is important to know where God's love is located and how it is expressed for you. If you judge God's love for you based on how you feel, or on what happens to you every week, then easy it is to conclude, God mustn't love me because of the suffering I'm having to endure, or the feelings I feel. Circumstances and emotions change with the wind. Look to Christ, look to the Lord your God and you see something unchangeable and eternal, sure and certain for you—a promise of God that through Christ you do not perish, but endure forever, and this treasure is in your hand by believing in Him. We have something in common with the Israelites in Numbers 21 and that is we, too have a poison flowing through our arteries and Scripture calls it sin. We, too have been bitten by the snake, the ancient foe who slithered into the garden and told lies our first parents believed. The ancient foe, the serpent of death continues biting humanity, for we live with a sinful nature while combating a corrupt world at enmity with Christ and His Church. We get impatient with God and we loathe His gifts. We question our vocations and think God has abandoned us to die in the wilderness when undergoing an affliction we cannot bear. Nothing could be further from the truth, but sin is rebellion against God, and our sin pushes us to rebel against His Word, to clench our teeth and tighten our fist and rage against His Word that requires us to deeply and truly forgive our enemy from the heart. The venom of sin poisons the heart, and the flesh fees from the light, hiding in darkness so that our sin will be hidden and not exposed. That's the reason wicked people hate the light, because if they come into the light, their vile deeds are seen for what they are. But avoiding the light is no different than if the Israelite avoided the bronze serpent thinking the poison would just go away on its own. It doesn't.

Dear Christian friends, God has not left us in the dark. In a world filled with opinions, false doctrines, false beliefs and false prophets, lies and deceit; through all the clutter and mess, your God speaks. His Word is certain and true. Christ is the Light by whom our sins are exposed but forgiven by His blood. Coming into His light, confessing sins that grieve us as we beg for His mercy and help, we do so because He has given us a promise that no other religion on earth gives—not one. That promise is whoever believes in Christ, the Son of the Father has eternal life, a gift God has given you, even faith to believe it. When you come into the light bringing all your sin, you do so with the knowledge that Christ Jesus bore all of your sin and by doing that He has crushed the ancient foe. The serpent is crushed at the feet of God's Church. All your trials, all your tribulations and affliction, sickness, disease and even death has been overcome by Christ who gives you eternal life, a phrase that means you possess and are an heir to a life with God where no longer will you experience the pain of a sinful world because you will dwell in the light of your Savior Jesus.