

John 3:14-21

“The Cross Is A Must”

Fourth Sunday in Lent (B)

March 10, 2024

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Jesus said:] **“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 3:14-15).

Where do you look when you have a problem? Where do you go to find a solution? Do you fixate on your troubles, your mistakes, the mistakes of others, or do you look elsewhere for help?

Satan wants us to live in darkness and disease, buried in remorse, anger, guilt, grudge, or condemnation. But today’s Gospel lesson announces a reason to look up. In Christ Jesus alone, there is everlasting light and life that overpowers all darkness and all disease. Jesus says, “The Cross is a must!” He says, **“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 3:14-15).

Jesus was cursed so that we might live. God states in Deuteronomy 21: **“If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God”** (Deuteronomy 21:22-23a).

We like to blame others for our problems. It sure beats the work of self-assessment. Grumbling at God for our predicament comes more naturally than asking Him for help. How quickly we become discouraged and impatient toward our gracious God, as did the Israelites in the desert.

God is patient. He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but He will not forever put up with those who spurn His love. So, He sent fiery serpents to punish the grumbling Israelites. When bitten by these serpents, the people died. But some of those who haven’t been bitten, repented of their sin, and appealed to Moses saying, **“We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that He take away the serpents from us”** (Numbers 21:7).

So, Moses interceded for them to God. By God's command, Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. It looked like the source of death, but by God's power, whoever was bitten by a fiery serpent, should he look on the lifted-up snake, would live.

The Son of Man was also lifted up. He hung on a criminal's cross, from all outward appearances, He looked like a sinful person, but He was truly righteous. He took upon yours and my sins to take upon Himself the curse of sin.

Again, do you have troubles? Do you fixate on your mistakes? Sin has a way on taking over our lives – as St. James writes, ***“Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death”*** (James 1:15). Sin brings forth more sin, and sin leads to death. Sin shrivels faith. Sin reduces us to anger and unhappiness. So, what can we do?

“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 3:14-15).

We look up to Jesus and His cross! We look up to Jesus, the sinless One who became sin for you in order to remove the curse and give you new life.

Again, Jesus says that His going to the cross is a must. It is a must that the Son of Man be lifted up because as the lifting up of the serpent was a must for the healing of a sinful people, so too, the lifting up of the Son of Man is a must for the salvation for the world.

God's promise of healing and life was given to all who looked upon the bronze serpent lifted upon the pole, so also the promise of eternal life to all who cling to Him in the lifting up of the Son of Man.

Eternal life is only found in the crucified Son of Man. Apart from the bronze serpent on the pole, the fatally snake bitten Israelite had no possibility of healing. Likewise, apart from the Crucified, there is no salvation or eternal life.

But Satan does not quit. He still hisses accusations at us. Satan says, “You still feel wretched. And you deserve to feel wretched.”

So, just as that bronze serpent made a sport of the fiery serpents, so too, Christ was lifted high upon the cross to silence our accuser.

Thus, we boast in Christ the Crucified. The Son of Man was lifted up on the cross to mock the old serpent, Satan. He made a public spectacle of the defeated devil.

“[Jesus] disarmed the demonic rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Him” (Colossians 2:15). Upon that cross, it was as if Satan was nailed to the cross, since through Christ’s death, He defeated Satan’s power to accuse us.

Not only does Jesus remove the curse of sin and silence the evil foe, He also heals our hurts and pain. By God’s command and promise, those who looked up at the bronze serpent were healed. Just imagine how those Israelites felt.

That bronze serpent’s power was not in itself, but to the reality that it pointed toward: Christ the Crucified. The lifted-up Son of Man heals all who cling to Him from the deadly bite of our evil foes: sin, eternal death and the devil.

Between the events of the wilderness and the crucifixion, we have an *act of seeing* – the bronze serpent – and an *act of believing* – the Son of Man lifted up; we have physical life and eternal life; and we have the way to the land of promise and Jesus, who is the Way.

In Word and Sacrament, look to Jesus in faith. As we read and hear His Scripture, know that those words are His Words. It is Jesus who is speaking. It is Jesus who is speaking Law and speaking Gospel. In Baptism, the Holy Spirit points us to Christ the Crucified. In the Lord’s Supper, we receive the victorious Crucified and Risen Christ’s body and blood under bread and wine, which forgives our sins and heals our faith.

In faith, look up to the crucified Christ, now raised and forever glorified! In Him is life everlasting, which overpowers all darkness and disease. For it is ***“by grace you have been saved through faith”*** (Ephesians 2:8a). We are saved by the act of believing, believing in the Son of Man, who was lifted up, so that we, by His grace, would have forgiveness of our sins and life everlasting.

In this fallen world, we will still face our evil foes. We will still face many bites, but their venom will not poison those who look up to Christ the Crucified.

So, come and let us fix our eyes on Jesus, who endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ***“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”*** (John 3:16). For Jesus, the cross was a must for us and for our salvation. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +