

## **"Lifted Up"**

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

22 March 2009, Lent 4B

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### **John 3:14-21**

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. "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. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you tell us that everything is possible for those who believe. We do believe; Lord, help us overcome our unbelief. (Mark 9:23-24) Amen.

Our Old Testament Lesson this morning is Numbers 21:4-9.

We find our Hebrew ancestors,  
newly freed from Egyptian captivity,  
recently saved from the Pharaoh's pursuing army  
by the parting of the Red Sea and drowning of his soldiers.  
The Hebrews were wandering in the Sinai wilderness  
searching for food and water.  
They are a grumbling crew,  
making their complaints known to Moses and against God:  
"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?"

The Lord responds  
by sending poisonous serpents among the people.  
Many were bit and many died.  
The Hebrews were smart enough  
to link together their words and actions  
with God's response.  
Remember,  
they witnessed God's actions against Pharaoh to deliver them.  
So they went to Moses and confessed their sin,  
begging deliverance from the snakes.:

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"We have sinned  
by speaking against the LORD and against you;  
pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us."<sup>1</sup>

So Moses prayed for his people.  
God spoke to Moses;  
gave him an immediate response,  
an immediate revelation:  
"Make a poisonous serpent,  
and set it on a pole;  
and *everyone who is bitten  
shall look at it and live.*"<sup>2</sup>

When the people gazed upon the bronzed serpent on a pole,  
their minds turned to God.  
God healed them.  
God saved their life from death.  
Notice: God didn't take away his serpents.  
God provided a means of salvation from them.

Everyone who looks up,  
sees the faithful response to God's command,  
will see it and will live.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is from John 3:14-21.  
There is so much here;  
too much for today.  
So I will focus upon on two verses:  
"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."<sup>3</sup>

The setting for this passage  
is Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus,  
a Pharisee and leader of the Jews.  
While Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Passover,  
Nicodemus seeks Jesus out,  
under cover of night,  
and says to him,  
"Rabbi,

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 21:7

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 21:8

<sup>3</sup> John 3:14-15

we know that you are a teacher who has come from God;  
for no one can do these signs that you do  
apart from the presence of God."<sup>4</sup>

Quite flattering, don't you think?

To which, Jesus responds,

"Very truly, I tell you,

no one can see the kingdom of God

without being born from above."<sup>5</sup>

Thinking literally, Nicodemus asks

"How can anyone be born after having grown old?"<sup>6</sup>

Jesus replies with his statement about being born anew, or from above.

This is where the phrase "born again" incorrectly originates.

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus comes to an end

and John, the evangelist,

picks up Christ's theological discourse.

Jesus reflects upon

our Old Testament passage from Numbers,

"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,

so must the Son of Man be lifted up."<sup>7</sup>

The Greek word Jesus uses for "lifted up" is HYPSON, which literally means one continuous ascent.

This word is found only three other times in the Gospel of John

- when Jesus is lifted up onto the cross,
- when He is raised up from the dead, and
- and when Jesus is lifted up into heaven.

The Gospel author's approach ...

John's approach ... to this is this:

when he uses the words "lifted up"

he is intentionally

equating it with SALVATION:

When Jesus is lifted onto the cross,

we are given salvation from sin (forgiveness).

When Jesus is lifted up from the dead

salvation is given from death (that is, eternal life).

When Christ is lifted up into heaven,

we are granted salvation from Christ's absence.

Christ leaves with us the presence of the Spirit (Holy Spirit).

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<sup>4</sup> John 3:2

<sup>5</sup> John 3:3

<sup>6</sup> John 3:4

<sup>7</sup> John 3:14

The story doesn't end with His ascension.  
 "...so must the Son of Man be lifted up..."  
 The salvation story is ignited new and fresh  
 with each generation of Christians.  
 The clarion call comes to each disciple  
 at the moment of conversion,  
 that it is now a duty,  
 a responsibility,  
 to lift up Christ,  
 that all who gaze upon him might be saved.

Salvation isn't a done deal.  
 It can only happen when Jesus is lifted up  
 and, like the Jews of old said  
 in an effort to make sense of the Law,  
*this act will turn our minds to God.*

I believe that the GEM in today's passage  
 is the timeless message  
 calling us to lift up Jesus,  
 like Moses lifted the serpent on a pole,  
 so that all who are broken,  
 all who have sinned,  
 all who have been hurt,  
 all who desire Christ,  
 may look upon him, believe, and be saved.

It is our responsibility to lift Jesus up to the world,  
 to offer God's salvation to those who will see and believe.  
 If we don't, who will?

When I think back to those twelve days of travel to Israel and Italy  
 I experienced the effort of fifty generations of faithful Christians  
 Making it their generation's purpose  
 To lift up Jesus to the world.  
 "God so loved the world"  
 Is evident in Michelangelo's "*Creation*"  
 painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.  
 "That he gave His only Son"  
 Is evident in the Orthodox Church of the Nativity filled with beautiful mosaics portraying out  
 Savior's birth.  
 "That who so ever believes in Him,"

Believing is evident on the shores of the Sea of Galilee,  
 The church of the Multiplication,  
 And the mount of Beatitudes.  
 "Shall not parish"

Is evident at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre,  
 Where Jesus was nailed to the cross,  
 Up-righted into a hole  
 And his broken body was laid upon a stone.

"But shall have everlasting life."  
 Stepping inside the Garden Tomb,  
 Entering the Church of the Ascension,  
 Lifting eyes to the heights of St. Peter's Basilica's dome;  
 Each a historical testimony to Christ lifted up.

It is our responsibility to lift Jesus up to the world,  
 to offer God's salvation to those who will see and believe.  
 If we don't, who will?

In what ways have you lifted Jesus up this past week?  
 A while back an old friend said  
 he wanted to talk with me about his grandmother who died.  
 She never "knew the Lord," he told me.  
 I could hear the concern in his voice.

"Your worried for your grandmother, aren't you?"  
 He was asking me if she went to heaven or hell.

"The God that I've come to know  
 and experience and love in my life"  
 I began,  
 "doesn't damn any of his beloved children to hell."  
 Hell is right here on earth.  
 Hell comes from not believing,  
 not placing trust in God.  
 Her hell is over now,  
 for now, she believes."

It felt like I was right in the groove of today's Gospel,  
 when it reads "those who do not believe are condemned already."<sup>8</sup>  
 We judge ourselves,  
 by our belief or unbelief.

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<sup>8</sup> John 3:18

Opportunities abound for us to lift Jesus high;  
 to lift him high for others to see,  
 to believe,  
 and to be saved.

Consider all the people who meet in a day,  
 at work, home, social organization, scouts, politics, where ever.  
 Everyday, there is a multitude of opportunities  
 to witness to the God of our experience,  
 to lift up Christ,  
 and to share His love.

Here are some helpful hints:

- Stick to people you know, friends & family. These are the people with whom you've already established a high level of trust.
- Allow them to share their hurts and pain in life with you. Just like the Hebrews, the ones who were bit by the poisonous serpents were the ones going to Moses for help. Do more listening and understanding than talking and preaching.
- Begin with your own experience: "...the God I've come to know and experience and love in my life..." Speak about what you know.
- Share your faith, your inner beliefs, and in doing so, lifts Jesus high. So that, as it says in v.15, "whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Remember, the eternal life of others is dependent upon our witness.

"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."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus was lifted up:

to death,

to resurrection,

to God on high.

Now, it is our responsibility,

as his followers,

to continue to lift him high

and offer him

as God's gracious gift to the world.

The gift of Jesus

is the gift of salvation.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> John 3:14-15