

LIFTED ON A POLE FOR OUR SALVATION**Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent, 2021****John 3:14-15**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the first two verses of the Gospel for today, John 3:14-15: **¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

John 3:16, “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life*” has often been called the Gospel in a nutshell because it sums up the Good News of Jesus Christ. We could easily say the same thing about our text today, for it also contains the wonderful Good News of our salvation.

From our text, Jesus says, “**As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.**” Jesus draws an analogy between the act of Moses lifting up the bronze snake in the wilderness and His own saving work for the world. The snake was lifted up on a pole; Jesus was to be lifted up on a cross. As everyone who looked in faith at the snake was healed from the bite of deadly snakes, so everyone who would look in faith at Jesus would be saved from the bite of eternal death and have eternal life. This is the life that begins with the new birth by the Spirit.

Jesus’ words take us back to the incident we heard about in our Old Testament reading for today, from Numbers 21. Israel had come out of Egypt and were now wandering around in the wilderness. Because their journey to the Promised Land was not a direct one, which would have only taken them a short while, they began to murmur and complain. They said, “*Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread or water, and we detest this wretched food*” (21:5). In their complaining mood, they were blind to the many gifts God was giving them. They would rather go back to the slavery they experienced in Egypt than to have to travel through the wilderness like this to get to the Promised Land. They were sick of the “ready to eat meals” that the LORD was providing for them. Every day it was manna on the menu. Same old, same old, every day. So they whined and grumbled and complained.

But this was manna sent from heaven. The LORD was providing for them, keeping them alive through the wilderness. They had to trust Him to provide for them daily. They had to trust God to be faithful and eventually lead them into the land He had promised. Last Sunday, our First Reading from Exodus contained the Ten Commandments. Remember the first commandment? “*You shall have no other gods before Me!*” (Exodus 20:3). Remember it’s meaning from the Catechism? “*We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.*” The people of Israel did not fear, love, and trust in God above all things, and so they grumbled. They grumbled against Moses, who was simply God’s servant, doing what the LORD had told him to do. So, in effect, they were grumbling against God.

They are not the only ones. We, too, grumble against God on our way to the Promised Land. Each one of us carries complaints of some sort. Sometimes we complain about how hard we have it, or the lack of God’s provision, or any number of other things. When we complain, we are no better than the Israelites, and our lack of trust in God is exposed.

This lack of trust in God and His goodness, the idea that God is somehow holding out on us, is the essence of what sin is. It goes back a long way, even before the time of the Israelites in the wilderness. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden thought God was holding out on them. The serpent tempted them to doubt God, to doubt God’s Word and His goodness. We see how that turned out. Adam and Eve fell into sin, and with sin came the curse of death, and the rest is history. We have all been doing the same thing ever since.

The LORD had taken the Israelites to be His own people, but they too failed to trust in God, falling into sin, and with sin came death. “*The LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people. They bit the people, and many of the people of Israel died*” (Numbers 21:6). Notice the instrument of death here: snakes, serpents, just like the serpent in the Garden that had first tempted man to sin. The LORD here is drawing the connection between sin and death, the sin of failing

to trust in God and the consequence of death that follows as a result. If that were all there was to the story, then that is all we would have to look forward to. We, too, are sinners who grumble against God, people who do not trust God as we ought, and the wages of sin is death.¹

But there is more to the story, and the story is hanging on a pole. Judgment and punishment and condemnation - as just and as well-deserved as that judgment is - is not all there is; praise God! There is also God's unmerited mercy and grace and love. Out of that great love, God has provided a way of escape, a way of salvation, hanging it on a pole. *"Make a fiery snake and put it on a pole!"* the Lord told Moses. *"Anyone who has been bitten should look at it! Then he will live"* (Numbers 21:8). This bronze snake, a symbol of the very sin that literally was killing them, became the means God provided for the healing of the Israelites. To look to that bronze serpent, lifted up on a pole, was to see and receive the salvation the LORD in His mercy had bestowed.

That is the comparison Jesus makes in our text: **"As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."** What happened with that snake on a pole would be replayed in an even greater fashion. Jesus Himself must be lifted up as the means of even greater salvation. He, too would be hung on a pole.

The whole world - not just the children of Israel, but the entire world, including us - were sick and dying as we lay there grumbling against God, doubting His goodness, shaking our fist at Him. That is the world's natural state, our lost condition. We were dead in our trespasses and sins.² Yet God, being rich in mercy and love, provided the way of escape, the way of salvation. Just as that bronze snake, the very sign of the sin and death that was killing the Israelites, became the very means of their healing, so in the same way ***Christ Jesus took the sin that was killing us and became the means of our healing and salvation***. The Apostle Peter writes: *"He Himself carried our sins in His body to the cross"* (1 Peter 2:24). St. Paul says it even more starkly in Corinthians: *"God made Him who did not know sin to be sin for us, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God"* (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus became sin for us. He literally took it all in by being "lifted up." Christ Jesus' crucifixion on Calvary with the world's sins upon Him was no accident. Isaiah writes, *"It was the will of the LORD to crush Him with suffering"* (Isaiah 53:10). The LORD had the world's good in mind. On Calvary, Christ's triumphant *"It is finished"* communicated clearly that the death penalty that the world's sin merited had been paid in full by another. Now God, because of Christ, no longer charges the sins of the world against the world. Instead, He credits the righteousness, the holiness, of Christ to the world.

Now one may think of Jesus being **"lifted up"** means being "lifted up" in glory, being exalted, being highly honoured. But not here. When Jesus says of Himself, **"the Son of Man must be lifted up,"** He is talking about His being lifted up on the cross - being lifted up in shame, being lifted up to die. In the strange paradox that is the Gospel, *Christ is glorified precisely by dying on a cross*. Christ is lifted up - and consequently, God's grace and mercy and love are lifted up, glorified - by Jesus literally being lifted up, that is, being hoisted in the air, on the tree of the cross. The story is hanging on a pole.

Dear friends, we must look to that pole, look to the cross, for our healing! Christ hanging on that cross is our only hope! God has provided for our salvation - indeed, the salvation of the whole world! We look to Jesus, our crucified Saviour, in faith. This is what it is to believe. This is no great work we are doing. This is no new demand. Faith is not some new demand. It's simply receiving the gift that God gives.

We heard the Apostle Paul before in our Second Reading put it this way: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, that no one may boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9). Being saved by grace through faith comes from God. Our believing is no great accomplishment on our part for us to be proud of. It's just receiving what God freely gives. As we have learnt in the Catechism: *"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel,"* and so on. We were helpless and hopeless and dead, by nature, children of wrath. However, God in His mercy has made us alive together with Christ. Faith, then, believing, is simply receiving. All the glory goes to God.

So we look in faith to that pole. We look to the cross, where we see our Saviour lifted up! He is lifted up **"that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."** This is more than a snakebite that we are cured of: We have been given eternal life! Eternal life is new life, life with God, life restored to how it ought to be, life with no more

¹ Romans 6:23

² Ephesians 2:1

sorrows or misery or separation or sin or death. Eternal life is the new life found only in Christ, and it lasts forever. It is life that will characterise the age to come when Christ returns in glory and leads His people home, at home in the Promised Land of the kingdom of heaven.

This eternal life begins even now. We have this eternal life now, having been baptised into Christ death and resurrection and believing in His name. Eternal life is ours already now, and death will not stop it. Christ has died the big death for us; that's already taken place. And He has risen from the dead, risen from the grave, never to die again because death could not hold Him.³

We have been joined to Christ in Holy Baptism. We have already died and risen with Christ. We already have eternal life. It is a present possession.

“As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.” In its own way, this passage expresses the Good News of salvation just as well as John 3:16. It's not the Gospel in a nutshell, but it comes pretty close. It's the Gospel hanging on a pole. And here's what it tells us: Jesus Christ was lifted up on the cross for us and for all the other snake-bit sinners of the world. Look to Him, look to Jesus in faith and be saved. Believe in His name, and we shall have eternal life. This is the “Gospel on a pole” that will lift us up all the way to heaven! Amen.

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

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Lord, We praise You for all Your loving kindness. We rejoice that You have rescued us from darkness and eternal death, and blessed us with Your love, light, and life. We thank You that You have not punished us as we deserve, or repaid us for our sins. In Your love You have given Your only Son to carry our sins and to suffer for our transgressions, that we may not perish, but have eternal life. We thank You that through Him we can approach Your throne, confident that there we shall find mercy and help in every need. Give us daily joy in Your free forgiveness for all our sins, and in all the endless blessings of the Gospel.

O Lord, You are mindful of the needs of all people. You give daily bread to both the godly and the ungodly alike. We praise and thank you for supplying all our bodily needs. Enable us to use the lives You give and sustain to show forth Your love and care. Grant us the continuing gift of health, that we may serve You with joy through Him who is the bread of life, even Jesus Christ.

Give us opportunities to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to others who do not know it. Keep Your Church in Jesus Christ in the one true faith. Bless the ministry and outreach of the AELC, that we may continue to be shining light to an ever increasing dark world.

Give wisdom, integrity, and Your direction to all who wield authority, that we may worship and serve You without hindrance, and live in peace and righteousness. Protect us from the influence of wicked people, and preserve us in all dangers.

Give Your strength to all who suffer sickness, pain, disease, or any other trouble of body, mind, or spirit. Enable them to bear their cross with faith in Him who taught us to pray: “Your will be done”. In His glorious name, and for His kingdom's sake, we pray these things. Amen.

³ Acts 2:24

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴ Then they journeyed from Mount Hor on the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom, but the people grew impatient on the way. ⁵ The people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no bread or water, and we detest this wretched food."

⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people. They bit the people, and many of the people of Israel died. ⁷ Then the people came to Moses and said: "We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that He may take the snakes away from us!"

So, Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ The LORD told Moses: "Make a fiery snake and put it on a pole! Anyone who has been bitten should look at it! Then he will live."

⁹ Therefore, Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then, when anyone who had been bitten by a snake looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

Ephesians 2:1-10

¹ You also were dead in your trespasses and sins. ² You once led your lives in those sins, following the ways of this present world and the ruler who governs the air, the spirit who is now working in the people who disobey. ³ All of us also once lived among them in the lusts of our sinful natures, doing what our sinful natures and minds wanted to do. By nature, we deserved God's anger like all the others. ⁴ However, God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love

for us, ⁵ also made us, even when we were dead in trespasses, alive with Christ. It is by grace that you have been saved. ⁶ Moreover, in Christ Jesus, God raised us with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms, ⁷ to show, in the coming ages, the immeasurable riches of His grace by being kind to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For He has made us what we are, creating us in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared in advance, that we may live in them.

John 3:14-21

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God has not sent His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world may be saved through Him. ¹⁸ The person who believes in Him is not condemned, but the person who does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of God's only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict, that the Light has come into the world, but people have loved darkness rather than the Light, because they have been doing evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wrong hates the Light and does not come to the Light, that his deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ However, he who practises the truth comes to the Light, that his deeds may be plainly seen to have been done in God."