

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 26, 2006
John 3:14-21

“Grace Lifted Up”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

There is a thought that occurs in all three of the lessons for today that ties them nicely together. The connection is of similar words rather than exact matches for the words used in the lessons in Hebrew and Greek are actually three different words. But the thought is similar. It has to do with raising or lifting up. The object of this raising up is different in each of the lessons as well. In the Old Testament lesson, it is the bronze serpent, in the Epistle it is us with Christ, in the Gospel lesson it is Jesus Himself. Yet those differing objects are in a sense all lifted up by the same thing. That is most clearly presented in the Epistle lesson in the word grace. From these three lessons then may the Lord bless as we see in the words of our theme for today: Grace Lifted Up! May His Word enlighten our hearts this day.

I. Old Testament Background

We begin with the Old Testament lesson which serves as the basis for Jesus' words in the Gospel. The children of Israel are in the wilderness and as the lesson says, they grew impatient. It was not an easy life for the children of Israel out in the wilds of the desert. But their complaints grow louder against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!" They have obviously lost their faith in God. Or they have turned against him. Their tribulations have caused them to reject God's own care for them. They are unsatisfied even with the miraculous provision of the manna which makes it possible for them to survive in the desert. And their sin brings the judgment of God upon them in the form of venomous snakes whose bite proves fatal to many. And then suddenly, the people of Israel see the light. They come to Moses and say: "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us."

Moses prays for the people and the Lord instructs him to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole that anyone who is bitten can look on it and live. Moses did just that. And as the text concludes, "Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived." The bronze serpent, lifted up on a pole became a source of life for those who were perishing. As such, the serpent was a gift of pure grace—the Lord provided the way of salvation for his people. He kept them from perishing when they gazed upon the bronze serpent. They lived by his gift of grace. You could truly say that grace lifted them up.

II. Jesus Lifted Up

This Old Testament event is the historical reference to the words of Jesus at the opening of

the Gospel for today. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who has come to Jesus at night and had asked some sincere questions. Nicodemus acknowledged Jesus' authority. Yet he was confused by Jesus' statement that no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again. Jesus reemphasized the point by telling him that unless you are born again of water and of the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of God. In the continuing dialogue between the two, Jesus speaks of the fact that the Son of Man must be lifted up. He uses the snake which Moses raised up as a type—a foreshadowing of His being lifted up.

Now most certainly, the reference which Jesus is making here is to the cross. At least that is the obvious reference. In the twelfth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus says something very similar. "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." St. John writes immediately following: "He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."

Yes, our Lord would be lifted up on the cross. That is the focus of our Lenten journey once again. We must keep our eyes focused on the destination of Jesus' ministry. He goes inexorably toward the cross. He keeps His eye on the goal. Yet there may be more in Jesus' use of the words "lifted up" than just a reference to the cross. In other places in the New Testament, the same word or a form of it is used to indicate our Lord's exaltation to heaven. Indeed, St. Paul uses this word precisely this way in Philippians, "therefore God has highly exalted Him and given Him the name that is above every name." Precisely because our Lord suffered for us and took our place, he has been raised and is triumphant. His glorification came about because of his humiliation. He was lifted up on the cross; He is lifted up in glory.

And immediately following the words of Jesus come the words which reinforce the message of eternal life in him. Commentators have debated if Jesus himself spoke the words of John 3:16 or whether they are a reflection of the evangelist. Whatever the case, they are God's inspired words: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." These utterly familiar words have been called the Gospel in a nutshell—they state most clearly what the Christian faith is about. They state it concisely. In faith in God's Son who came into the world there is eternal life. For as the Gospel continues, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him." What a priceless and simple truth this is. What a message to be proclaimed and shared and believed. It is the main thing. It is the hope of the world. And in the midst of the trials of this present age, it is an ever present reminder to us of God's eternal love which is his gift of grace to us in His beloved Son.

III. We Are Lifted Up

And in that truth we too are lifted up. For the third time in the lessons for today the epistle makes that point abundantly clear. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "But because of his great

love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” Just as the children of Israel were saved from the deadly venom of the snakes in the wilderness by gazing upon the snake which Moses had lifted up on the pole, we who are dead in our sins have been lifted up in Christ Jesus. We are glorified in him. Our lives have their meaning and hope in his salvation, in his work, in his grace.

In fact, grace is the operative word in the Epistle. “For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” And in this grace by which we are saved “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works ...” Our lives are lifted up as well as we serve in love. And we can with St. Paul in Colossians chapter 3 say: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” (verses 1-3)

Grace has truly lifted us up. It is the grace of God in Christ Jesus. As we proceed through the next weeks toward Holy Week, may we be kept mindful that in the journey to the cross we see Jesus Himself lifted up for us. It is his victory that makes us free and forgives. It is his grace that saves. When you seem overwhelmed with whatever it might be, do not forget this simple and saving truth. It is by grace you have been saved.

As we sang before:

By grace! This ground of faith is certain;
As long as God is true, it stands.
What saints have penned by inspiration,
What in His Word our God commands,
Our faith in what our God has done
Depends on grace—grace through His Son.

In Jesus’ Name. Amen.