

John 3:14-21 | Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent 'The Son of Man is Lifted Up'

Numbers 21:4-9 / Psalm 107:1-3,17-22 / Ephesians 2:1-10 / John 3:14-21

Preached on 10 March 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch.

Let's pray: Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

Introduction

Our Gospel reading begins in the middle of a speech that Jesus has been giving to an audience of one, the Pharisee Nicodemus. Nicodemus had come to Jesus covertly, by night, and had asked Jesus questions about his identity. Jesus turns the conversation to baptism, as the way in which people, like us, are brought into the kingdom of God, being born from above, born of water and the Spirit.

But having proclaimed the centrality of baptism, Jesus now turns the conversation to faith, to trust in Christ, for where there is baptism there is belief. *Whoever is baptized and believes will be saved* (Mark 16:16). The two go together. Baptism gives us the Holy Spirit who encourages us in faith. And faith in Christ leads us to be baptized, the means through which Christ brings us into the kingdom, and also then to trust in the promises given to us in baptism.

The Son of Man is Lifted Up

With that background in mind, let's get to the first words of our reading:

[Jesus says] *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 (14-15).*

Jesus here is referring back to the incident we heard about in our reading from Numbers, probably the most well-known episode from the book of Numbers.

There the Israelites were in the wilderness, grumbling and impatient about the food and drink, on their way to the Promised Land. And then a plague of serpents comes from God. Many of the Israelites are bitten, and begin to die from the poison. They repent of their grumbling, turn to God, and God brings about a remedy. He instructs Moses to sculpt a bronze serpent and set it up on a pole. If anyone then looked at that serpent, they would live, they would be healed, the poison would no longer have any power over their bodies.

Jesus is bringing to mind all of this and saying that our life now with Christ is just like this. This is the example Christ himself gives of Christian living. How so? In this sermon I want to look at three ways in which Jesus is lifted up: that Jesus is lifted up on the cross in judgement and redemption. Second, that Jesus is lifted up in resurrection to eternal life out of love for the world. And finally that Jesus is lifted up to the right hand of God, and so you also have been lifted up, exalted.

1. Jesus is lifted up on the cross in judgement and redemption

One of the striking features about the bronze serpent is that God orders the very thing that is killing the Israelites to be lifted up. It's not hard to imagine the people being terrified by the serpents, even full of hate towards these creatures who had killed family members. The very last thing that many people would want to see, is held up as their cause for redemption.

And Jesus tells us that this is just like his own cross: *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.*

Jesus is like the serpent. While he himself was without sin, Jesus "became sin", we are told in 2 Corinthians 5:21, by taking on your sins to redeem you. The cross is confronting, because it reveals to us our sins, shows us the poison that has been at work in us, the same poison that scapegoated Jesus as the one to bear our afflictions. But the cross is also our remedy. It also shows us our joy, our salvation, our redemption. Christ crucified shows us what we have done, and it shows us what God has done.

A few years ago I was talking to someone from Australian Lutheran World Service who had recently returned from a trip to Cuba, and the Cuban Communist Revolutionary Che Guevara came up in our conversation. Recently, some photos of a deceased Che Guevara had been found and published, showing him disfigured after his execution. But my friend said that these photos were nowhere to be seen in the Cuban

newspapers, in fact they were banned, illegal to possess. Their hero was only allowed to be depicted in glory, in youth, in health.

But in Churches throughout the world the Son of Man is lifted up for us to behold him on the cross. Not shirking the judgement that it symbolises, but even moreso finding our redemption in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sake. We even have very vivid Christian practices like putting a crucifix in our homes, or using them in pastoral care for the sick and dying. We sing about this in the hymn Abide with Me: “Hold Thou thy cross before my closing eyes.”

The world doesn't want to know a dead hero, but we do. The Son of Man is lifted up on the cross in both judgement and redemption.

2. Jesus is lifted up in resurrection out of love for the world

For then our Gospel reading proclaims to us that Jesus is lifted up not ultimately to condemn the world for its sin, but out of love for the world. And to grant it eternal life, not just earthly life. Moving on to our second point, Jesus is then lifted up also in his resurrection, to defeat death for us and the world. Let's hear the next verses in our Gospel:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (vv16-17)

Jesus has been given not just to Christians but for the whole world. And not to condemn the world but to save the world, in a supreme act of love from God, the giving of his only Son. Christ is lifted up on the cross, but he is also lifted up from the grave in victory over death, so that whoever believe in him should not perish but have eternal life with Him.

It's not uncommon today to hear people writing the world off in one shape or another: politically, morally, environmentally, spiritually, militarily. Of course these can all be areas of great concern. But God's action in Christ is not to write the world off, but to save it. To rescue it. To seek the lost sheep. To run out to meet the sinner. God is not out to get us. He's not out to get the world. He doesn't want to set you traps, to see if you're good enough. But, as we heard in our reading from Ephesians, God [is] rich in mercy, [with] a great love with which he has loved us, [loved you], even when we were dead in our trespasses, and so has made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:4). Alive in his resurrection. Lifted up to eternal life.

As our Gospel continues, we hear that this does not mean condemnation does not exist in God. *"Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."* (John 3:18) Like an Israelite failing to look to the bronze serpent, eternal life is elusive to those who fail to look at Christ. Our mission as the church is here given impetus. To lift up Christ Jesus before the world, to proclaim the name of the Son of God, and testify to his death and resurrection.

For God has shown his love in history, in action, by giving his Son for the whole world, and raising him up from the dead. Let's come to the final point.

3. Jesus is lifted up to the right hand of God, so you also are lifted up, exalted

We have seen how Jesus is lifted up on the cross, and also lifted up in his resurrection to win eternal life for all who believe. But finally, Jesus is also lifted up to the right hand of God. In the book of Acts, twice Jesus is referred to as being 'lifted up' (2:33; 5:31), and both times in reference to his Ascension.

And in our reading from Ephesians, we heard what Jesus' ascension into heaven means also for our Christian life here and now. *"Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."* (Ephesians 2:5-6)

Did you notice that St Paul is speaking in the past tense? That you have been raised up with Christ also, and God has seated you with Christ in the heavenly places, even as you live on earth. The Son of Man is lifted up to the heavenly places, to also exalt you there now. As baptized people, we live already as members of the kingdom of heaven, gathered with saints and angels around the throne of the Lamb, who is lifted up in our midst.

At the end of our Gospel reading, we hear further what this looks like: *"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.” (John 3:21) Some translations have it that our deeds have been wrought in God, or accomplished in God. That those who do what is true come into the light, and the light shows that in their actions, God is at work in them.

Now, you may be saying, but I haven't always done what is true, I haven't done the works of God. This can't be describing me. But just listen to what Jesus says a few chapters later in John. He says, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (John 6:29) We do what is true when we look to Christ as we are doing now, and so coming into the light.

For already you have been born again, born “from above” in your baptism. And God is now at work in your deeds. At work as you confess your sins and receive forgiveness. At work in you as bear God's holy name in the world. And at work in you as you look to Christ, lifted up on the cross, lifted up from the grave, and lifted up at the right hand of God.

The Son of Man has been lifted up. Let us together look to him, and live.

May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.