



SUNDAY BEFORE HOLY CROSS

September 10

THE GOSPEL READING

John 3:13-17

[Life in the Kingdom]

The Lord said, "No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man who is in heaven. 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.

"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 sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

THE SERMON

While the people of Israel travel in the wilderness, they face many challenges shortly after their slavery in Egypt. This includes the long journey, the desert, the lack of water and food, and the temptation not to trust the Lord when they could not see their destination — the Promised Land. As they struggle with their faith, they become discouraged on the way. In their frustration, they complain to Moses about their challenges in the wilderness. Then, serpents come into their camp and start biting them, so they ask Moses to pray for them.



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Moses prays for the people, and the Lord tells Moses to make a brass serpent and put it on a pole. And if a serpent should bite someone, the Lord says, when the one bitten looks at it, he shall *live*.

This is the history behind Jesus' words when 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." The symbolic beauty points to the reality of God's love for us and the grace given to us by His Son.

In the Old Testament, the serpent symbolizes sin and the spiritual enemy of our souls. When the people stop trusting God, and begin to be bitter and complain, they drift away from God, which is when the serpents bite them. This is what happens with sin. When we direct ourselves away from the love of God instead of towards it, we become vulnerable to sin, which, in a sense, bites us and infuses venom into our hearts.

God, however, in His great love for us, has not left us to die in the wilderness, bitten by serpents, even when we turn away from Him. His love is endless, and He never gives up on His people. In the Old Testament, Moses prays to God and asks for His help. Moses, as the one who would lead the people to the Promised Land, prefigures Christ. Just as Moses prayed for his people in the Sinai Desert, so Christ continually mediates for us to our Father. He is the One who died and rose again so we can enter the presence of God forever.

Just as Moses in the wilderness hangs the serpent on a pole, so the Son of Man is hung on the Cross, and whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. Jesus refers to His Crucifixion here. When the people of God in the wilderness look at the bronze serpent, they are healed and restored to life. Jesus fulfills this because even though He is perfect and without sin, He took on all our failures and nailed them on the Cross as He was crucified. In that sense, He died for us, and on the Cross, He destroys death by death. He can do so because He is the Son of God, and because He rose on the third day to restore us to eternal life.

God so loved the world that He gave us His only begotten Son. The word "world" has different meanings in Scripture and tradition. It can mean the natural world, the entire cosmos — the heavens, the earth, the seas, and all that is in them, which God the Father created through the Son of God. It can also mean the world that has turned away from God, that is, worldly things such as pride and selfish desires. As Jesus says, "What will it profit a person if they gain the whole world, and lose their own soul?" (Mark 8:36)

In this Gospel reading, however, God loves everything He created and all human beings, regardless of who they are. This is why the Father sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. This is why the Lord became incarnate (that is, he took human nature and united it to His divine nature). This is why He lived, died on the Cross, and rose again. It is because He gives Himself for our weaknesses, which He heals and delivers us from death by giving us eternal life.

As Jesus rose from the dead, He also grants eternal life to all who believe in Him. As Saint Augustine of Hippo says, "He who looked to the serpent that was lifted up, was healed of its poison, and saved from death; so now he who is conformed to the likeness of Christ's death by faith and the grace of baptism, is delivered both from sin by justification, and from death by the resurrection."

This has a profound meaning for each one of us individually. The Lord loves the world and loves every single person in the world with *infinite* love. And with *perfect* love. He knows us by name, and He knows our hearts. He knows our struggles and even our failures. And yet, He has loved each of us and given Himself for us so we can have eternal life with Him.

If we open our hearts to that love of God, who loves us infinitely to the point of giving us His own Son, and if we open our hearts to the Son, who voluntarily gives Himself, we cannot but be filled with love for God. As Saint Porphyrios of Kafsokalyvia says, "What is higher than the highest? Love for Christ is something else. It is without end, without satiety. It gives life; it gives strength; it gives health; it gives, gives, and gives. And the more it gives, the more the person wishes to fall in love."

When we look at the Cross and have faith in Christ, we are healed from the effects of sin. God creates all things perfect and beautiful, yet we have often turned away from Him and wandered into the wilderness. As serpents, the sufferings and struggles of this world bite us. And yet, Christ has conquered all, and He has given Himself for us so we can have eternal life. As we behold the Cross, we are healed. As we behold His Resurrection with faith, we are raised to eternal life.