

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

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[0:00] In our Old Testament reading from Numbers chapter 21, we heard how the children of Israel became very discouraged.

! They had been brought up out of Egypt where they were slaves and were now making their way to the promised land as free people. The journey, however, was not pleasant as they had to take the long way around Edom.

We read in Numbers chapter 21, verse 5, And the people spoke against God and Moses. Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?

For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread, speaking of the manna that God had rained down for them from heaven.

So we then read that the Lord sent fiery serpents as judgment upon the people for their rebellion and their ungratefulness.

[1:05] The word fiery here refers to poisonous or venomous snakes. The people then go from complaining to now crying out to Moses for help in their distress.

They said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord that he would take away the serpents from us.

So Moses prayed, and the Lord told Moses to do something quite odd, something very peculiar.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Make a fiery serpent, an image from bronze, and set it on a pole, and it shall be that everyone who is bitten when he looks shall live.

And we go on to read, So Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a pole, and so it was. If a serpent had bitten anyone when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

At first glance, this is a very bizarre story. The people who had previously made a golden calf to worship are now told to look to a bronze image of a serpent in order to live.

[2:25] What's going on here? Well, one of the first things that we should note is that our Lord is not an iconoclast, meaning he is not against images per se.

Imagery, physical objects, are used throughout the scriptures. As a matter of fact, God became iconoclast. He became man in the person of Jesus, and Jesus is the icon of the Father.

The Lord created the material world to be enjoyed and to be utilized in worship, as long as the objects themselves do not become the things worshipped.

In other words, the physical world speaks to the creator of that world, the creator of all things, God. Images represent a greater reality, and the reality beyond these images is the Lord, the creator of all things.

But on a more fundamental level, the fiery or bronze serpent on a pole speaks to something even more profound.

[3:45] Please do not miss what I'm about to say, because this is how we understand our Lord's command in erecting this image of a bronze serpent here in Numbers chapter 21.

The very thing, that is the serpents that cause death, now becomes the very thing that represents life, as the people look to the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole.

This makes even more sense when we compare this to John chapter 3. We read our Lord's words in John chapter 3, verses 14 through 17, where he says, And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him, Christ, might be saved.

Jesus is the true antidote to sin and death. But in order to defeat death, he must take our sin and our death upon himself.

[5 : 15] Therefore, the God of all things now condescends to this earth. He comes to us. Jesus has come to us, people who are dying due to our own sin and our own selfishness, and the Lord takes our sin, he takes our death upon himself.

Therefore, the very instrument and symbol of death, the cross, becomes our life. It is our cure. The cross of Jesus is our life.

Today, we celebrate the feast of the Holy Cross. And the cross is not just a mere symbol that we wear around our necks. It's God's way of giving us life.

You see, we carry sin and death in our bodies. We are dying. And one day, we shall enter into that portal of death as we breathe our last breath here on earth.

But God has reversed the curse of death by taking our sin and our death upon himself. And the cross is no longer a chamber of death and execution.

[6 : 38] It is now the power of God who has transformed it, the cross, into life. And because of our Lord's cross, we enter the portal of death with the sure hope and faith that we shall also live with our God for all eternity.

Why? Because death has been defeated by way of the cross. Satan bruised the heel of our Lord at the cross.

But Jesus has crushed the head of Satan by way of his cross. And this was the promise given in Genesis chapter 3 verse 15 that is fulfilled in the cross of Jesus.

And the resurrection of our Lord is now the transformation of death into life. It is our hope. And that's why we make the sign of the cross.

What was once a symbol of death now has become our life and our identity. It is through the cross, through the shed blood of Jesus, and through his death that our sins are atoned for.

[7 : 56] They are covered. We now have peace with God because we look to the cross knowing that what once was a death chamber, a death sentence, it is now our tree of life.

And the Lord invites us, his baptized children, to eat of this tree of healing in the Holy Eucharist so that we might live.

The sting and power of death has been transformed by our Lord's resurrection, so we need not fear death, nor the grave. We look to Jesus, we look to his cross, because that is our life, and that is our purpose in this life.

My hope, dear friends, is that this gives you great comfort. In a day where there's so much anxiety and fear of death, no matter what happens with AI technology and how that will change the job market or the economy, no matter how tiring the endless wars are, or your own physical struggles, or your mental struggles, death does not have the final say on you.

God has already claimed you. You see, we belong to God. And through baptism, our lives are hidden in Christ, where death no longer reigns.

[9 : 35] It no longer enslaves us. So no matter what happens, we belong to God. Our hope, our purpose is built on Jesus Christ.

Yes, we can't ignore the fact that there are real challenges and even tears while we journey this side of eternity.

But life has meaning and it has purpose. And the reason why is because the creator of all things has come laying down his life out of love for you.

And in him we live. Death is merely the portal that we all must enter. But death has lost its power and its permanency.

Life eternal has been won for you by the cross of Jesus. And just as our Lord was raised to new life, so you too shall be raised with him.

[10 : 45] Therefore, again, whatever trials, whatever difficulties, whatever anxieties you deal with, look to the cross. Look to the cross and remember that in the outstretched arms and love of Jesus, you too live and shall reign with him forever.

Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.