

## RAISED UP WITH JESUS

In each of this evening's Scripture readings, something is being raised up. In the *Old Testament* reading, Moses makes a bronze serpent and raised it up on a pole so that any Israelite who was bitten by a venomous snake could gaze upon it and live. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus says that the "*Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.*" (*John 3:14*) And in his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul writes that "*God raised us up with Christ and seated us in the heavenly kingdom.*" (*Ephesians 2:6*) A serpent is raised up, Jesus is raised up, and then we are raised up. What does it all mean?

Let's begin with the serpent. [Read *Numbers 21:6-9*] What's going on here? Doesn't this sound a lot like pagan superstition—using magical charms and trinkets to ward off death and disease? The Egyptians, who had been the Israelites' masters up until a few years before this event, did exactly that. They worshiped snakes and made them into icons which symbolized life and fertility. They carried small copper replicas of serpents around with them to ward off disease and death. As a matter of fact, archaeologists have found large numbers of copper serpents in the area of Midian, just north of Egypt, along with remnants of the Israelites' portable tabernacle. Had the Israelites picked up idol-worship from their Egyptian masters? Is that what Moses was up to—using pagan magic to counteract the effects of snakebites?

Hardly. People who use magical trinkets carry them around to make the magic work—like rubbing your lucky rabbit's foot and making a wish. But the Israelites were instructed only to look at the bronze serpent, not carry it around or touch it. So that is not what was going on. The real clue to what was going on rests in the nature of the object itself: a bronze serpent fixed to a pole and raised up for them to contemplate.

What does a serpent always represent in the Bible? Satan, of course. From the Garden of Eden to the *Book of Revelation*, Satan is referred to as a serpent—in *Revelation*, as, "*the serpent of old, who leads the entire world astray.*" (*Revelation 12*). According to the promise in *Genesis 3:15*, the serpent's head—Satan's power—would be crushed by a descendent of Eve. The descendent would be Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, who would come in the fullness of time to take away Satan's power. Throughout the centuries that lay between the *Genesis* promise and the coming of our Savior, God sent sign after sign to the Israelites to remind them of what the Messiah would one day do. The bronze serpent, impaled upon a pole and lifted up for all to see, was such a sign—a promise that one day Satan's power to draw men into sin and death would be impaled upon a cross and lifted up for all to see. This was a beautiful foreshadowing of Calvary, where Jesus assumed the sins of mankind in his own body and let it be nailed to the cross, so that he would die with our sins and carry them with him to the grave.

And now as well as then, all who have been "bitten by the serpent," and are sick unto death with the poison of sin, need only believe that if they keep their faith firmly fixed upon

the cross where Jesus was raised up to win the victory over sin, death and the devil, they too will live.

In our Gospel lesson for this evening, Jesus clearly draws this connection. He says, *“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.”* (John 3:14) But why would Jesus compare himself to the serpent or to the serpent’s power to draw men into sin, disease and death? We find the answer in Paul’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to the Corinthians: *“God made him who had no sin to **be** sin for us, so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God.”* Unthinkable though it is, Jesus, the Son of God and king of heaven and earth, born without sin and sinless in life, in the end became the very thing he came to conquer: sin itself. *“God made him who had no sin to **BE** sin for us...”*

As uncomfortable—even unthinkable—as this thought is, it shows us precisely why Jesus came into this world. It was not only to bear our sins, as one carries out the garbage to the curb, it was to become the very thing to be done away with—to become the garbage, climb into the compactor and be crushed. The curse we brought upon ourselves and all creation he called down upon himself—and then died with it. Let us understand this clearly and unequivocally: **Jesus was damned on the cross!** Convicted by Almighty God Himself of OUR sins, he was sentenced to die and justly executed for our crimes. What else do you think the cross means? The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, did so by becoming our sin-bearer, our scapegoat, and allowing himself to be slaughtered in our place. That’s why the sin-bearer had to be God Himself because no human could have possibly borne the sins of all mankind. Only God could have done it—absorb the totality of human sin and then die with it. Only God could have endured the agonies of eternal hell compressed into six hours. Only God could do that and only God would do that because only God acts out of pure and selfless love at such unimaginable cost to Himself.

Contemplating all this, Paul wrote: *“Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. 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 for it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms...”* (Ephesians 2:4-6) Now the message finally comes home to roost: God has not left us to merely contemplate Jesus on the cross as the Israelites were invited to gaze upon the bronze serpent on the pole—he fused us with Christ in His death and in His resurrection!

Paul speaks of this in several places. *Romans 6:4-5: “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were, therefore, buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live in newness of life. For if we were united with him in his death, we shall certainly be united with him in his resurrection.”* At your baptism, you were buried with Christ and then raised up with him to new life. And of what does this new life consist? Well, the Bible says that it comes in three ways.

First of all, when you leave this world, your soul will be raised up to dwell with Jesus in paradise. *Psalm 116:8-9: “For you, O Lord, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living.”* Or as Jesus said to the thief on the cross: *“I tell you the truth, today you will be*

*with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43) When a believer dies, on that very day his soul rises up to be with God in paradise. Of all consolations, this may be the greatest.*

Second, when Jesus returns he will raise up for us new bodies in which we will dwell in His presence forever. *1 Corinthians 15:42: “So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable; it is raised imperishable....”* So don’t worry, if you’re disgusted with the body you have, you’ll be getting a new one that you will love!

Third and finally, it means that in this world and in this life we are raised up with Christ and reign with Him in His kingdom. And please understand, Jesus’ kingdom in this world is a kingdom of enormous power: the power to forgive as we have been forgiven; the power to serve as we have been served. We have inherited a lordship of sacrifice and service, perfectly symbolized by the cross. This is why Luther said that the Christian is both the perfect Lord of all and the perfect servant of all. Jesus put it this way: *“The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:11)* And again, *“The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the least and the one who rules like the one who serves.” (Luke 23:25)*. It is in self-denying humble service to our Christian brothers and sisters and faithful witness to our neighbors that we exhibit the lordship we have in Christ. God’s love is sacrificial love.

Speaking in advance of his impending crucifixion, Jesus said to his disciples: “...now the prince of this world will be driven out.” When we tell people the story of how Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for their sins, and that as a result they are completely forgiven and reconciled to God, *we are crushing Satan’s head!* When Jesus’ seventy-two disciples returned from preaching the Gospel in the farms and villages of Israel, they rejoiced and said, *“Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name. (Luke 10:17)* And Jesus said to them, *“I was watching Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” (Luke 10:18)* Each and every believer is called to be a guerilla soldier in the Kingdom of God and is armed and empowered with the Gospel to liberate spiritual prisoners of war being held in thrall by the prince of this world. And with the release of each new P.O.W., Satan’s kingdom is shaken and heaven rejoices. That is the power you have been given. Use it!

Will you pray with me?

Father in heaven, give us eyes of faith to discern your kingdom and brave hearts to proclaim it to all the world. In your Son’s precious name, we pray.

Amen.

READINGS on the next page:

### **Numbers 21:6-9**

<sup>6</sup>Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. <sup>7</sup>And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” <sup>9</sup>So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

### **Ephesians 2:1-9 By Grace Through Faith**

<sup>2</sup> And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. <sup>4</sup> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

### **John 3:11-15**

<sup>11</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.