

March 10, 2024  
John 3:14-21

Lent 4  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “In God We Trust”

“And just 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 food here is terrible!”  
“Yeah, and such small portions!”*

This old joke would have been an appropriate description of how many students at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia viewed the food in the Refectory, the campus dining hall. As is true at many academic institutions, the food made available to us was a constant source of complaints. We would complain about the blandness of some meals, the repetitive nature of the weekly menu (*“If it’s Tuesday, it must be meat loaf”*), and how food that was on the menu at the beginning of the week would reappear in another form at the end of the week. As frequently as we would gripe about the quality of the food, we would also complain if there did not seem to be enough food at a meal. It got to the point where the word “Refectory” became synonymous with food that would never make anyone’s favourite list of the good aspects of our school.

As often as we would grumble about the food at the Refectory, the building also served as a gathering place for the entire campus – faculty and staff as well as students. It would also be the place where visiting dignitaries would share meals while they were on campus. One memorable group of visitors was a group of pastors from Tanzania, home of one of the fastest-growing Lutheran churches in the world. As we sat down to a typical Refectory lunch, our visitors remarked how wonderful the food was at their table, and how fortunate we were to have such nutritious meals served to us. We were, of course, stunned at their reaction to the food about which we often complained, but they went on to share with us that not only do their seminaries in Tanzania lack dining facilities, but that students are often so poor that they are forced to skip meals. As they ate their meal with relish, we realized how inappropriate our grumbling was, and how fortunate we were to have three meals available to us every day so that we could continue our studies without worrying about if or where we would be fed that day.

The grumbling that we experienced at seminary can be heard in today's first lesson that is also referenced in our Gospel lesson from John, which includes the most famous verse in the Bible: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life."* (John 3:16). This verse, often referred to as the "Gospel in miniature," does indeed summarize the central message of the Gospel, that God loved the world – the same world that did not love God in return – that God gave his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, so that those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord no longer need fear perishing because they now have the assurance of eternal life. It is the basis of one of the most beloved of all Christian hymns, the "amazing grace" that is ours through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As popular and beloved as this verse is for many people, no single Bible verse exists by itself but is best understood in the context of where it is found in Scripture; so today's Gospel lesson begins two verses early with reference to an incident in the Old Testament that is to say the least quite strange: *"And just 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."* (John 3:14-15). The Fourth Evangelist is referencing Numbers 21:4-9, which is today's First Lesson, which is the last in a series of scenes in which the people of Israel complain to Moses about their situation in the wilderness following their liberation from slavery in Egypt. Almost from the beginning, the Israelites complained ("murmured") about the conditions in which they found themselves, to which Moses would respond in providing what they felt they lacked:

- "When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it is called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' He cried out to the LORD; and the LORD showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet." – Exodus 15:23-25.
- "But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?'" – Exodus 17:3.
- "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." – Numbers 11:4-6.

The pattern of complaining to Moses and looking back nostalgically at their years in Egypt (somehow forgetting the harshness of their enslavement) would continue, with Moses approaching God on their behalf and God responding by providing for the people, until finally it appears that God is fed up with their grumbling. When

the people again complain that “*there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food*” (Numbers 21:5), the Lord’s response is that God “*sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites perished.*” (21:6). While this may appear on the surface to be an act of divine retribution because of the people’s disobedience and rebelliousness, at its heart it is a response to the people’s lack of faith and trust in the Lord who liberated them from bondage in Egypt and is leading them back to the Promised Land. Serpents in the ancient world were often revered for their healing powers and were often worshipped as gods. For the Israelites who were often drawn to the worship of the gods of their neighbours (the reason why the first Commandment states that “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.*” (Exodus 20:2-3). Faith in the Old Testament is regularly understood as trust, not belief in certain doctrines or creeds. Moses challenged the people in their grumbling to trust that God would keep God’s commitment to lead the people to the land of promise and provide for them during their journey in the wilderness. In their complaining against God and seeking out other Gods, the people were rebelling against the very God who had liberated them from slavery. The venomous serpents who turned on them was a harsh lesson that the false gods they looked to for life and nourishment were in fact forces that would not provide the life they sought but would lead to death. When the people realized what their faithlessness to the Lord and their idolatrous worship of other gods had cost them, they returned to Moses in repentance, confessing that “*we have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us*” (21:7). When Moses intercedes to God on behalf of the people, the Lord commands Moses to “*make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look on it and live*” (21:8). The Lord takes the same serpent that had been the source of death for the people and now transforms it into a source of healing and life for those who look upon it and see that it is only through the true God, the Lord of heaven and earth, that there is life, healing, and salvation, so that “*whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live*” (21:9).

- “Once the people have recognized their sin and confessed it to Moses, their tormentor becomes their saviour. Once Moses makes it possible for them to fully gaze upon what they are afraid of, they gain access to its healing power.”  
– Barbara Brown Taylor.

In the Fourth Gospel, John refers to this incident in the wilderness to proclaim that “*just 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.*” (John 3:14-15). The

key to understanding this analogy between Moses' lifting up the serpent in the wilderness and the ascension of the Son of Man is the verb *hypsōo*, which can mean both "lift up" and "exalt." As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness so that what had been a source of death becomes a source of life for all who see it as a sign of the presence of the Lord, so the Son of Man (the phrase Jesus frequently uses to refer to himself) must be lifted up on the cross. The double meaning of *hypsōo* implies that the physical act of lifting up is also a moment of exaltation. The overlap of crucifixion and exaltation is critical in John, because the Fourth Evangelist understands Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension as one continuous salvific event. The Cross as humiliation is actually exaltation; "*there is no exaltation apart from crucifixion.*" (Gail O'Day). When the Israelites gazed at the symbolic portrayal of the effects of their sin in the form of the bronze serpent lifted up by Moses, they were granted healing and life. Similarly, whoever gazes in faith at the ultimate effect of human sin, the crucifixion of the Son of Man, is also changed and given eternal life, "*that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*" (3:15). Jesus' offer of his life through being lifted up on the Cross makes eternal life possible for those who believe. "Eternal" does not mean an endless duration of human existence but is a way of describing life as lived in the unending presence of God; "*to have eternal life is to be given life as a child of God*" (O'Day). The offer of new life, which Jesus defined as "*to be born again/from above*" (3:3), has only one source – Jesus' offer of his own life. To be born "from above" is to be born "again" through the lifting up of Jesus on the Cross. As the serpent that was a source of death was transformed by God into the source of life for all who put their trust in the Lord, so now is the Cross that was the source of death inflicted on the people of Israel by the Roman Empire transformed into the source of life for all who believe in Jesus Christ, so that "*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his*" (Romans 6:5).

It is in this context that we find that most beloved Bible verse, in which we hear the good news that the Father's love for the world leads him to give his only Son for the World's salvation. The Incarnation – "*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*" (1:14) – derives from God's love for the world as well as from God's Will. What is extraordinary about this love of God (*agape*) is that it is a love for the "world" (*kosmos*) that is often described in John as being at odds with God and Jesus:

- "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him." – 1:10.
- "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil." – 7:7.

- “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you.” – 15:18-19.

God’s gift of Jesus, which culminates in Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, decisively alters the options available to the world. If one believes, one’s present is altered by the gift of eternal life; if one does not believe, one perishes. This gracious love of God is further explained in the next verse, in which the Evangelist proclaims that *“indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* (3:17). The Father does not want the world to perish (*“The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance”* – 2 Peter 3:9). The love of God that is revealed *“when I survey the wondrous cross”* is a love that is *“so amazing, so divine”* because it is the proof that *“if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.”* (2 Timothy 2:13).

- “God is ‘the God of all grace,’ in the apostle Peter’s words. And grace means that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God’s family.” – Philip Yancey.

The blessings of eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are a gracious gift that God bestows on all humanity – even those who have not been loving to God in return. But as all gifts must in turn be received by those to whom they are offered, so must the free gift of God’s grace be received by those to whom it is offered. The very presence of Jesus as the Incarnate Word in the world confronts the world with a decision, to believe or not to believe: *“Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God”* (3:18). The human response to this offer of salvation and new life has the most serious of consequences, for the decision for belief or unbelief in the Son is directly linked to eternal life or condemnation. As the light shining in darkness, the presence and work of the Son in the world necessarily provokes a response: people respond to the light with either faith or unbelief (*“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.”* – 3:19). As light exposes the reality of our world in both its beauty and ugliness, so do people *“love the truth for the light it sheds, but hate it when it shows them up as being wrong”* (St. Augustine). To love darkness rather than light is the same as not

believing, and it results in judgment. The way a person acts in the presence of the light is the defining mark of the person's identity: *"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"* (3:21). Whether one is good or evil is revealed solely by the decision they make in their encounter with Jesus. Who people are is determined by their response to Jesus; *"God sent Jesus to save the world, but each person must decide whether to accept that offer of salvation."* (O'Day).

- "Thus all is well if you believe. But those who love darkness more than light will experience the reverse. They must live in dread of the last day. For the believer, the thought of this day is comforting, since condemnation and terrible judgment are gone. 'On that great day, O Lord, sustain me with your powerful word. Amen.'" – Martin Luther.

Our Tanzanian guests at the Seminary Refectory exposed a truth that we would have preferred to have kept hidden: that our grumbling and complaining was in reality evidence of our lack of faith and trust in the God who we confess provides all we need for daily living *"out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all"* (*Small Catechism*). As the people of Israel were confronted by their lack of trust in the Lord who liberated them from slavery and provided for them in the wilderness, so must we confess that we often fail to trust in God and look toward other sources that will only disappoint and even enslave us. As the serpent Moses lifted up reminded the Israelites of their need to trust in the Lord and in no other god, so does the Cross of Christ remind us that it is only through our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection that we have the assurance of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. May we continue to place all our faith and trust in this amazing grace, the *"grace [that] has brought me safe thus far, and grace [that] will lead me home."*

Amen.