

The Son of Man Lifted Up

Sermon: St. Peter's Cathedral, March 11, 2018

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning!

I am sorry to disappoint you. You were all hoping to hear a different preacher. We were supposed to have The Rev. Vincent Cutter visit us and preach, but as you have heard, his home was broken into last week and he did not think that he would be in a good enough frame of mind to make the trip. Our hearts go out to him and his family as they recover from such a traumatic experience.

The scriptures we have heard lead us further into Lent and bring us closer to the cross where Jesus will enter into his final battle with his enemy at his crucifixion. We heard a story from the Book of Numbers which can be understood as a foreshadowing of Jesus' crucifixion centuries later. The story happens when Moses and the Israelites are in the wilderness. God had just delivered them in victory from a battle over the Canaanites, but their memories and their gratitude do not last long. The people murmur again that there is no food or water. So, the Lord is angry and sends poisonous serpents to bite them. Many die. But the people repent, admitting that they have spoken ill against both the Lord and against Moses. The Lord tells Moses to set a poisonous serpent on a pole and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

The important thing to remember here is that it was not the serpent who gave life and health, it was God. The serpent was to remind the people to trust God who was saving them and guiding them through the wilderness. The healing power was not in the bronze serpent, it was only a symbol to turn their thoughts to God.

When Jesus speaks of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness he draws a parallel with his own crucifixion. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so will the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him will have eternal life." Later, in chapter 8 and chapter 11 of John's Gospel, Jesus foretells his death. He says in chapter 8 that, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak only those things that the Father has instructed me. In chapter 11 he is

with his disciples when he teaches that “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”

So, this morning’s lessons speak of Jesus’ death and that is what I want to talk about. Jesus, of course is speaking of his death by crucifixion, the most heinous capital punishment ever invented, so heinous that it was eventually outlawed as too cruel to be an action by a legitimate nation or empire. When Jesus speaks of ‘being lifted up’ he is referring to himself hanging on a cross and dying. That would be some death, some conclusion to a life of love, healing and forgiveness—some death to a man who was supposed to be the Messiah, who would save the world by returning it to God’s control.

People have been trying to understand the death of Jesus and what God intended from the day it happened. I would like to give some simple explanations, which have served me through the years, though any effort to figure it out will be inadequate and should be inadequate. Finally, we as disciples and as finite human beings, will never be able to fully understand our infinite God. One of the most important phrases to help our understanding is called “The Paschal Mystery”. What God did in Christ on the cross and why, has been haunting us for 2,000 years, but at some point we must stop trying to figure it out and simply rest in the mystery of God’s sacrificial love.

Having said that, it is possible to put some words together to try to explain some of why Jesus chose to suffer, to die, and then to rise in victory. I want to share some understandings that have helped me over the years.

When I was in seminary, we had a New Testament professor who was retiring. He preached a final sermon and I had the privilege of hearing it. The title was simply this: “Jesus Chose to Die”. I have never forgotten that title. It has served me my whole ministry, not because it is clever, not because it is only four words, but because it is true. Jesus chose to die. His death was not an accident. It did not happen because things got out of control. It did not happen because the Jews wanted him dead as a false Messiah. That was a part of it, but Jesus was there in Jerusalem that fatal week because he chose to be there.

What was God up to? What was His plan? What was Jesus there to do?

My favorite story that explains Jesus' passion is a famous story told by Martin Luther. Perhaps you have heard it. It concerns God the Father, Jesus His Son and the Devil. Luther was out fishing one day. As he was trying to catch a fish, the whole gospel, the whole story of Christ's sacrifice on the cross came to him in a flash of revelation. It is a great story to tell to a congregation in Montana, where I am told that people here do a lot of fishing.

Luther cast out his line into the water and then it all came to him: the old, old story of God, the devil and Jesus. God created the world out of love and the Devil came to corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. God could not sit by and let the devil take over, so he sent his son to destroy the power of the devil. How could he do that? How could God defeat the power of the devil and free his creation from destruction?

God decided to go fishing. He decided to capture the devil by fishing for him. He put Jesus on the hook, knowing that Satan would go for the bait. The devil went for the bait, because he wanted to destroy Jesus. Once God hooked the devil, he reeled him in!

Those are two parts of the Passion and death of Jesus which have been very helpful to me over the years: Jesus chose to die and Luther's revelation when he went fishing.

I will bring this sermon to a close with just a few more words. Actually, we will be talking more about the death of Jesus in our class this evening. But I will summarize all of this in two important words, CHRISTUS VICTOR. Jesus' Passion, his redemptive suffering ends in Victory. There was much more to Jesus' passion than freeing us from sin and death. He did come to free us from sin and death. But most importantly, he came to defeat the power behind sin and death, which was the devil. Having defeated the power behind sin and death, Jesus was not only victorious. His victory continued with new life through the power of His Spirit given to the Church and to future generations.

God's salvation does not end with the triumph of Christ which had held people in bondage. It continues through the work of the Spirit in the Church. Christ's salvation is not only *from* sin and death. It is *for* a new life, free from the enemy of God who would corrupt and destroy us. Salvation is a bestowal of new life, not just forgiveness. Jesus' death is the decisive battle. There would be more battles,

but this was the decisive one. Christ's victory on the cross would show the whole world for all generations down to the end of time, that even though there would be more battles the final victory of God would be guaranteed.

All of this is symbolized in the cross of Jesus being lifted up. All this is accomplished through the loving initiative and grace of God. St. Paul says just this in a verse from Second Corinthians, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." (2 Corinthians 5:19)

On the cross, the power of the enemy was free to do its worst. In the end, the devil was exhausted and out of power. Jesus was dead, because the author of death had killed him. But Jesus would be raised by the power of God and the world would never be the same. Thanks be to God.

The Very Rev. Graham Smith, Interim Dean