

Fourth Sunday of Lent/March 14, 2021
John 3:14-21/Christ Came Down to Lift You
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church
Pastor Jerry Stobaugh

“...that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

A few moments ago, we each confessed our common Christian faith, by the words of the Nicene Creed, in “...one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.” Being crucified was to be nailed to a large cross and hoisted in the air and left to die an excruciatingly painful death, the Roman mode of execution. Anyone crucified was lifted up on a cross to die in a public spectacle. Such a fate awaited the Lord, but at the time of our text, His time had not yet come.

It was time, however, to catechize Nicodemus, a member of the Pharisees and a secret follower of Jesus. Nicodemus knew the Scriptures, but did not understand them. He was unable to see the Scriptures have their fulfillment in the Person of Jesus Christ, the long-promised Messiah. He wanted to understand, but he had a large mental block; rabbinic Judaism. Jews at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, the Scriptures were little more than law. Consequently, Nicodemus could not understand the necessity to be born again; he tried to comprehend this in a physical sense, as if a grown man could re-enter his mother's womb. So, Christ catechizes him on the necessity of being born of water and of the Spirit, to believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and become baptized in and into His saving Name. The seal placed on us at our Baptism, by which the Holy Spirit came and entered our hearts, creating and sustaining in us saving faith in Christ. By faith produced through Holy Baptism we are born of water and of the Spirit.

In this Sacrament the Old Adam is brought down in the holy water to the point it drowns and dies. This baptismal drowning should take place each and every day in the confession of sins. This means we should daily confess of our sins, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but God's temporal and eternal punishment. We have sinned against Him in thought, word, and deed by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We do not fear, love, and trust in God above all things, but give in to the temptations of the unholy triad of the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's Name nor let His kingdom come nor let His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We lift ourselves up in our sinful pride, even as the Israelites lifted themselves up in their own eyes, and therefore sinned against the Lord and against Moses, and they were bitten by fiery serpents. The Lord beats us down with the preaching of His Law, for we too are full of sinful pride. He, who scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts and put down the mighty from their thrones, brings us down to our knees, so we repent of our sins, for without repentance and faith we are, as Paul says in our Epistle, [Eph 2:5] "...we were dead in our trespasses", and, as Christ says in our text, "...but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed." Now when Christ, the Light of the world, comes again on the Last Day, as we confess in the Athanasian Creed, "...all men shall rise again with their bodies and shall give an account of their works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into

everlasting fire. This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.”

In the Old Testament reading for today, [Num 21:8] “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be to everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.’” The Israelites who were bitten and looked up to the serpent were saved. The Israelites confessed their sins and placed their trust in the Word the Lord gave Moses, the Word to erect the serpent on the pole. They were brought down in their sins, and the Lord lifted them up in His grace. Our Lord says, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” In order for Christ to be lifted up, He had to come down, coming down from heaven and hiding His glory in human form as our text also states, “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 did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be born of the Virgin Mary, so He would be lifted up on the cross to die for the forgiveness of our sins. His dead, lifeless body was taken down and laid in the tomb, so He would take it back up again by rising from the dead. The Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree, as He promised, draws us now to Him. Christ our Good Shepherd laid down His life for us His sheep to take it up again. No one takes it from Him, but He laid it down Himself and He did so for you, the lowly in heart, for He has lifted you. His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation, even to this present generation, to you and me. As St. Paul writes, [Eph 2:4-6] “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ

Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

Until that Day when we sit in the heavenly places, our Lord brings the heavenly places down to earth. He comes to us in His Word and Sacraments. He comes in Baptism not only to bring down the Old Adam to its death, but to lift up the new creature each day, to daily emerge and arise, so we would live before God in righteousness and purity forever. He lifts us up each day in the forgiveness of sins daily living in our Baptism the seal of Him who died, for we are marked with the sign of the cross as redeemed by Christ crucified. As the baptized children of God, we have the privilege of lifting up one another in prayer, praying for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs, and lifting up one another through prayer, hymns, and psalms.

Our Lord brings the heavenly places down to earth, down to us with the angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven as He comes to us in His Supper, as the cup is lifted up, lifted up so you would taste and see the Lord is good and you would be lifted up to receive the foretaste of the Feast to come and to catch a glimpse of the heavenly places, for heaven and earth are full of His glory here at His Table. Until that Day when we are lifted up into the heavenly places for all eternity, you need not fear what the devil, the world, and your sinful nature throw in our way, “For,” as the Psalmist writes, [Ps 27:5] “...in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock.” The Rock of your salvation, Jesus Christ, your Rock and your Redeemer, your Mighty Fortress will guard and protect you into the new heavens and the new earth.