

THE GOD WHO SO LOVED THE WORLD
John 3:14-17; Holy Trinity; May 29-30, 2021

On the festival of the Holy Trinity I always feel like I need to preach about our “worship of one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity,” as the Athanasian Creed begins the confession of the Trinity. But, honestly, after confessing the Athanasian Creed, what more can I say? It gives more details than the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds but, in the end, we confess the same faith in the same God.

The faith that the Church confesses in all three creeds, the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian, is “catholic” with a small “c,” the faith as it has been rightly confessed by the Church of all times and places. By confessing the creeds, the Church is “inoculated” against false teachings about God that seek to infect us. Religions that claim to be Christian but reject what is confessed in these creeds are recognized as unchristian and to be avoided like the plague. Or when Christian denominations start to innovate and get creative with their teaching and practice, the creeds identify the errors and ground us again in the biblical Christian faith. Anything that contradicts or denies what the creeds confess has to be condemned as false, things that, if believed, will cause people to lose their salvation and perish eternally.

That being said, the Church of the ages wisely chose our Gospel Reading for Trinity Sunday from John three. It begins with Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees coming to Jesus to “talk theology.” But Jesus was not very interested in talking about God, but rather teaching who God is and what it takes to enter His kingdom. Jesus identified the key issue as this: the Son Man who descended from heaven and would ascend and return to heaven. The center of our faith is who Jesus Christ is and what He came to do for us.

To teach this, Jesus referred to the account of God sending poisonous snakes among the unfaithful Israelites on their way to the Promised Land, snakes that bit them so they started dying. The only way to be saved after being bitten was to look at a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole. Jesus explained why He came by making this comparison: **“And 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.”**

Jesus, the Son of Man and the Son of God the Father, came down from heaven to show God's love by being lifted up on the cross to give eternal life to everyone who believes in Him, faith worked by the Holy Spirit. This is the one God we confess is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus describes who God is and what He has done to save us from our sin and give eternal life in Him.

Jesus compares us and our situation to the sinful Israelites in the wilderness. Hear that account from Numbers 21 to refresh your memory of the details: **From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food [manna]." Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. 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. 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." 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** (21:4-9).

To reject the only true God and the care He has for us in this life is to go back to the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve and believe the lies of the fiery serpent, the devil, who can only give us death and hell in the end. One of the things that God sometimes does is give sinners exactly what they want apart from God, which ends up biting them. How can we respond to suffering God's consequences of getting what we wanted? We can accuse God of being mean and unloving, or we can repent of our sins and seek God's forgiveness for Jesus' sake.

When the Israelites repented of their sins they asked Moses to pray to God to take away the serpents He had sent to bite them. But God did not take away the snakes, which kept biting them. What God provided was salvation from being bit and dying. A bronze serpent, the sign of their sin, was lifted up on a pole that they could look to it in faith and be saved.

Why did He do that? Listen again to Jesus: **“And 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.”** In His love God the Father sent His Son to be lifted up on the cross to die for our sins. The bronze serpent on the pole pointed ahead to Jesus on the cross. In Jesus’ day, death on a cross was reserved for the worst of criminals and slaves. It was an ugly way to die.

Often the crosses we have in church or wear as jewelry are beautifully decorated, sometimes made from gold or silver and encrusted with precious stones. All three crucifixes we have in the front of our church are beautiful pieces of artwork. Yet the cross of Jesus remains a symbol of our sin. Our sin is ugly. Our sin caused the suffering of Jesus. Our sin caused His death and will lead to our deaths. Just like the Israelites, who were snake bit and dying were reminded of their sin when they looked at the bronze serpent on the pole, we should be reminded of our ugly sin every time we look to the cross of Jesus.

“So must the Son of Man be lifted up,” Jesus says. The word **“so”** here is the same as one in verse 16: **For God so loved the world.** **“So”** is not a description of God’s love in terms of **“how much”** but in **“what way.”** Like the bronze serpent had to be lifted up and looked upon in faith to save, **“so,”** in the same way Jesus had to be lifted up on the cross to save us. If we want to think of **“so”** in terms of how big something is, we should think of our sin. Our sin is **“so big”** that it required Jesus, God’s Son, to suffer in such a way as He did on the cross and die to forgive our sin and give us eternal life.

John 3:16, **“For God so loved the world,”** might be the most well-known verse in the whole Bible, but God’s love is underestimated if we think of love as just His feeling toward us. John 3:16 describes God’s love as a Person, the Son being given by His Father to do something for us: suffer and die on the cross to save us. The ugliness of our sin is seen in the ugliness of Jesus’ suffering and death, but beauty is seen in our forgiveness and eternal life in the One who rose from the dead. It is God’s love that takes the ugliness of Jesus’ cross and makes it into something beautiful and glorious, **that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. 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.

When Adam and Eve chose the way of the serpent, sinned, and brought death to this world, God could not let the world perish in sin. You and I can choose to let sin destroy us and others, but God could not. It is the nature of God to love, not condemn. It is the nature of God to save what is lost and to forgive what is sinful. **“So must the Son of Man be lifted up,”** Jesus says. Another way of putting this is switching the statement from the passive into the active tense. **“In His love the Father had to send His Son and lift Him up on the cross... that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.”**

It is the Holy Spirit who works this faith leading to eternal life. Our faith is in the One who descended from heaven to become man and be lifted up on the cross to die for our sins, who also rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us. In this faith we see the ugliness of our sin exhibited on the cross of Jesus, yet also of our sins being lifted from us and placed on Him so they are forgiven, which makes His cross gloriously beautiful. Snake bit and dying in our sins, we can look to Jesus on the cross and be saved. Jesus came into this world to save us, not condemn us. This is our faith in Jesus that is worked in us by the Holy Spirit.

For in this way God the Father loved this sinful, dying world: He gave His only Son to die on the cross and rise from the dead, that whoever believes in Him by the Spirit’s working should not perish but have eternal life.

“Whoever desires to be saved must, above all else, hold the catholic faith... And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity,” as we confess in Athanasian Creed. That faith is this: **For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.** Amen.

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