

## **“Lifted Up for You”**

### **John 3:1-17**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It’s not an unheard-of thing to lift things up as you present them to someone for them to see. If you’ve ever been to an estate auction, they parade the item out in front of the crowd and lift it high for all to see. Most of you have probably seen the Lion King, and at the birth of Simba he is lifted high for the entire kingdom to see. The idea is that the object of the event at hand is the focal point and the reason for its existence. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus references Moses and the bronze serpent as He catechizes Nicodemus in the dead of night. That serpent on a pole was held before the eyes of the Israelites and, as Numbers 21:9 records, all who were bitten would look upon it and live.

Why would Jesus use this example when talking about baptism, earthly things, heavenly things, and eternal life? Because the object of the people’s salvation was lifted up before their eyes as a prefiguring of the lifting up of the Son of Man. Jesus is foretelling the reality of His crucifixion, as He is lifted up on a pole, on a tree, and placed before the eyes of the whole world as the source of their salvation. The people in the wilderness were not saved just because they looked upon the serpent that Moses lifted up. They were saved because they had faith. In exactly the same way, you are not saved simply because you look upon the body of Christ upon the cross. Anyone can simply look at a cross and say, “That’s Jesus.” You, like Abraham in our Old Testament and Epistle lessons, are saved because of your faith in the one who is lifted up. And that gift of faith is yours by His grace, because the Holy Spirit has brought it to you for the sake of the One who is lifted up for you.

In our text this morning, Jesus speaks of things being born of the flesh versus born of the Spirit. There’s an important implication in that description that is often missed by popular commentators and theologians. These two things cannot be equal to one another. There is no option to take what Jesus says and make it equal “that which is of the flesh is Spirit, and that which is of the Spirit is flesh.” Spirit and flesh are diametrically opposed to one another, as Paul teaches us in Romans 8. Which is why it makes no sense that the mainstream church in the world today takes the stance that they are the same. The things of the flesh are not the friend of God’s Church—they are its enemy—rather, they are perpetrated and used by the enemies of God.

The society in which you live has abandoned the true things of the Spirit (though some would hold that it never even had it), and that has bled over into the church. Ask

someone on the street what they think the church is, and they will likely start talking about stages, bands, and preachers yelling breathlessly as they pace the stage. Making the church appeal to society is precisely the opposite of what we are bid to do by our God. He tells us through the Apostle John in 1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” You are called out of the world through the proclamation of the Gospel, and yet, your sinful flesh continually pulls you back into it.

And that is why we must be born again as Jesus says in our Gospel lesson. “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” It’s obvious that you need the rebirth of water and the Spirit, or rather, it should be if Law and Gospel are rightly preached. The Law shows you your utter inability to please God by your works, and the need of your sinful flesh to be cleansed of its filth of sin. That is the reality of what Jesus tells Nicodemus. His works are not what will save him and bring him into God’s Kingdom. Only being born of water and the Spirit can do that. In other words, only *faith* can do that. And faith is given by the Word and water of Holy Baptism when the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens faith in those blessed waters.

Faith in Christ is the rebirth of water and the Spirit, because that is what those waters create. As one who has been regenerated, reborn in the faith of Jesus, the things of the flesh which are flesh must be cast off. You are called by the Gospel to love the Law of God and live lives in accord with the faith which you have been given. Nicodemus would have believed in his works for his salvation if your Lord and Savior had not pointed him to the truth of the Gospel. Works follow faith, not the other way around. And so, Jesus points him to the truth of Abraham’s salvation. Even though He doesn’t mention Abraham in the text, the reality of what is recorded in Genesis 15:6 is clear and evident: “And he believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness.”

Faith in the Messiah—faith in Jesus Christ and His being lifted up—is what has made Abraham righteous, and it is what will save Nicodemus and the whole world. The righteousness of Abraham preceded the Law being given at Sinai, which means his salvation is not in his works, but by faith. Paul says so clearly in our Epistle lesson, Romans 4:13, “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring (you) that he would be heir of the world did not come through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.” *Sola Fide* is not a new idea that Luther just came up with on his own. According to the revealed Word, God saves according to faith in Jesus Christ. God saves because of the Son of Man being lifted up as the all-atoning sacrifice for the world, and all who believe in Him will have eternal life.

The call of the Gospel to Abraham in our Old Testament lesson, to Nicodemus in John's Gospel, and to all the world is a call not to good works and living, but a call to faith in Jesus Christ. It is a call to faith in the crucified and risen Savior, who has suffered, bled, and died for you on the cross of salvation. And that is the gift the Spirit brings. The gift of faith is that which is born of the Spirit, and it is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit acting in unity of Trinity, and Trinity in unity. The full Godhead is active in faith, and Jesus makes that clear by His assertion to the Pharisee in our text. By the proclamation of His coming death, the supreme act of love which He has come into the world to achieve, Nicodemus is brought to faith. The Spirit brings concrete faith in Christ as the Savior of the world, not nonsensical feelings or emotional outbursts disguised as faith.

God gave us His only Son, that whoever believes in Him would have eternal life. Whoever has faith in the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved from eternal death and damnation. Whoever is reborn of water and the Spirit—whoever is a baptized child of God—is an heir of the promise to Abraham, and has the gift of eternal life. You are a baptized child of God, and so you are the offspring of Abraham. Faith has been given to you and it has appropriated the saving grace of your Lord Jesus Christ to you. That is not something you can do for yourself. Only the Spirit blowing where He wills can do that for you. You don't know where it comes from or where it goes, but faith is yours nonetheless because you are born of the Spirit. No guessing. You know without a doubt that you are in the faith because He has called you, just as He called Abraham. And just as Abraham responded in faith and obeyed the Lord, you too respond in faith to the Lord's call, and obey Him.

The righteousness of faith is yours by the blood of the One who has been lifted up for you. Jesus has gone to the cross to be your salvation, to deliver you from the scourge of sin, death, and the power of the evil one. To be lost in the things which are born of the flesh, and thus lose sight of that which is born of the Spirit, is to be lost to those things from which the Lord has liberated you. And that is why Jesus was sent into the world, "not...to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him (John 3:17)." Just as Moses lifted the bronze serpent up before the eyes of the Israelites in the wilderness, here in this place, the crucified Christ is lifted up before you as the source of your salvation. And that is not just an ambiguous statement that you have to use your imagination to understand. He is truly here.

His crucified body and blood are present here before you at His table. In, with, and under the bread and wine of His Holy Supper, His body and blood bring forgiveness, life, and salvation to all who believe. It brings everlasting life to you as you eat this

bread and drink this cup, proclaiming the death of the Lord, Jesus Christ, until He comes again (1 Cor. 11:26). It is concrete and assured. It is an earthly thing with heavenly realities. Heaven is opened here before your very eyes, and we partake of the meal of the Lamb with the whole host of heaven.

That treasure is yours, not because you have earned it, but because of the faith with which your Heavenly Father has blessed you. And because you have received that blessing, the Lord uses you as a blessing to the “families of the earth.” Faith is yours because you have been born again of water and the Spirit, and as such you have entered the Kingdom of God. Salvation is yours by Jesus’ blood, and your Gospel proclamation as the priesthood of all believers spreads that blessing far and wide. Because of Christ’s being lifted up for you, you and all believers will enter the glory of His presence, together with all the saints and angels, and have the fulfillment of your faith as you dwell in His righteousness for all eternity. Amen.