

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Trinity Sunday
John 3:1-15
May 26th, 2013

Families have stories. Some stories involve courage and reward. Other stories involve suffering and heartache. Some stories have happy endings and other stories not so much. Some stories involve remembering what our fathers and mothers, our grandfathers and grandfathers did for our country – setting out for military service – sacrificing for the war effort and much, much more. On a weekend such as this one, we remember these stories that involve those we love – involve us specifically.

In the Gospel text for today, John chapter three, John goes back to an Old Testament story which is told in Numbers 21:4-9. On the Israelite's journey through the wilderness the people of Israel murmured and complained and regretted that they had ever left Egypt. To punish them God sent a plague of deadly, fiery serpents. The people repented and cried out for mercy. Then, God instructed Moses to make an image of a serpent and to hold it up in the midst of the camp; and he, who looked upon the serpent, was healed and saved. That story made an impression on the Israelites, much like the stories of our fathers or grandfathers make an impression on us.

In the Gospel text for today Jesus takes that old story – a story that all of Israel would know by heart – and shows how it will be fulfilled through the work of the Savior. Jesus says, *“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.”*

I would like to focus on one particular word that Jesus uses here in the text. It's the Greek word *“hupsosen”* and it means, “To lift up.” The strange thing about this word is that it is used of Jesus in two senses. It is used of His being lifted up upon the cross. And it is used of His being lifted up into glory at the time of His Ascension into heaven. You see, there was a “double lifting up” in the life of Jesus. He was lifted up on the cross and He was lifted up in glory. One took him to death – the other took him to heaven. Both were for a purpose. Both were to show us what we endure in faith. Both show us that believing in Jesus really has a two-fold reality in our lives – death and glory.

Have you ever thought of it that way – faith in Jesus takes us to death? It “lifts us up to the cross” like Jesus was lifted up. And as we gaze at our Savior through the eyes of faith, we have been healed and made whole again. In order for there to be life there must first be death – namely the death of ourselves. We put to death our sinful ways. We put to death the old Adam within us by repentance and contrition. Christ's death leads to Christ's life. Our life in Christ leads to death which leads to life with Christ. Admittedly this is a bit convoluted. But that's life. Tell me when your life has not been convoluted. Life to death to life – that seems to be the pattern doesn't it. I'm convinced that our faith puts us in the position of dying and rising back to life each and every day. On a personal level, we die in our faith all the time. Yes, it's true, in faith we put to death all evil desires and sinful lust and we rise to life in Christ. That's faith and that happens in our baptisms each day. But we die in another way as well.

As faithful people who live in faith each day, we die in our pain and suffering. No, we may not actually die in pain or suffering but it sure feels like it. I have talked to members of our congregation that are in such dire straits in life – emotionally or physically. They tell me, “Pastor, it would be better for me if I were dead.” I have seen people so ill and in so much pain they say to me, “Pastor, I just wish that the Lord would let me die.” I have counseled people who feel as if they are so sinful and undeserving of God's free gift of grace through faith that they say, “Pastor, I don't deserve to have

heaven. I don't deserve to live. I deserve to just die." The consequences of a fallen world – disease, pain, and suffering – can be too much of a burden to carry. The stigma of a sinful condition can make us feel like we deserve nothing but God's wrath and nothing good will ever come into our lives because of what we have done. The circumstances that we live with today we feel will never get better, weigh on our hearts and trouble us to no end.

But there are two things that conquer the world's consequences and give us hope for something yet far greater to come. Two things Jesus talks about today in both verse fifteen and verse sixteen of John chapter three. These two things are faith and eternal life. And both gifts are realized today. Even in the midst of all suffering and death this world affords – we have it!

First of all, faith, believes in that word, "*hupsosen*" (to lift up). Faith grabs onto the fact that our Lord was lifted up to death and then to life. Remember, in this world, faith embodies both life and death. Faith is believing that there is death – but it never ends with death. Faith believes that life will conquer death. Faith knows death and knows that even the most faithful of all people will experience death. Faith doesn't mean that we won't experience all that. As a matter of fact, the Bible is clear that we will experience death – at least the results of death – on this side of eternity.

You know this, and the events that happened this past Monday just outside of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma are a stark reminder. Another giant tornado rips through a populated area and even ravages a school. A vicar, Aaron Uphoff from nearby Norman, Oklahoma, put on his collar and drove toward the destruction. When he couldn't drive any further he parked his car at a house and a couple there gave the vicar a bike with which to ride into town. When he got there everything was destroyed. He met people that were downright giddy to be alive, and also a man who was inconsolable because his dog had died in the fierce storm. He went to the Plaza Tower Elementary school where people were standing in line at a police check line. A young couple was standing there waiting to hear word whether or not their nine-year-old daughter, Emily, had made it out of school... alive. He prayed with that couple, as he did with many others, and left them with these words, "Christ be with you." If there was ever a time to see our "lifted up" Savior – when nothing is left standing up – it is during times like these. Hard to imagine.

Secondly, faith in God is seen in the light of what Jesus talked about in verse fifteen – eternal life. If we possess eternal life, what do we possess? If we enter into eternal life, what is life like? To have eternal life changes every relationship in life. Eternal life is not what we will have – but it is what we have today. Eternal life is our life in Christ today – a "lifted up" life that lives for Christ. A life that lives in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – three persons in one blessed God.

Faith in God and His gift of eternal life. Both are yours today. They are given by our God that we define by the Scriptures. God is our Father in heaven, who created us – the Son who came to be one of us, who redeemed us – the Holy Spirit, who shows us the gifts given and grows us in life – are still working through the greatest of all stories – the Gospel. A story lived and heard that will change your life. A story lived by the Israelites that changed their life. The raising up of a snake gave them life in the desert. Today the raising up of a Savior gives us life in this wasteland of a world we live in right now – even in the midst of great tragedy. Praise be to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the life given to us. It's more than "just" a story. It's a work, a death and a life lived for us. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.