

Title: "John 3:16"

Riddle for today:

What is the connection between
a snake on a pole
and Jesus on the cross?

Our Gospel lesson for today, from John 3:14 speaks about such a connection.

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up".

Now, when I first read it, I found this odd, because typically the snake represents Satan or sin. So, what is the connection? Today's scripture reading from John answers that. John 3:14 speaks about two crosses, i.e. two poles, upon which something is lifted: one from the Old Testament, during the time of Moses, and the other, the cross of Christ. Their connection? Both become entries into God's grace.

The story of the serpent being lifted up is from Numbers 21:4, our Old testament reading for today. It is a continuation of the story of Moses and the people of Israel. The people of Israel have just been freed from slavery in Egypt. They are presently wandering the desert. But instead of remembering their rescue, their freedom from slavery, and feeling grateful and trusting God, they are now grumbling: grumbling against Moses, grumbling against God. They complain about their food, about their clothing. There wasn't enough variety for them. So, God figures, "These people of mine need a lesson." So poisonous snakes were sent in to their camp to punish them for their sinful behavior toward God. As a result, many of them are now dying. In panic, Moses turns to God and begs Him for mercy. God agrees and then instructs Moses to put a snake on a pole and says "everyone who looks upon it will live." What was the meaning of that?

Well, since olden times the serpent has symbolized Sin, as in the story of the Garden of Eden, and Adam and Eve. So, when God orders them to look upon the serpent, he ordering them to confront their sin, to confess their sin before God. And if they did, they would receive the forgiveness of their sins and they would be healed. So even back in the time of Moses, God foretold the method by which His people would be saved - the forgiveness of sins, The serpent on the pole because a symbol of entry into God's grace.

Now, the connection to our gospel lesson - the connection between the "lifting up of the serpent on the pole" and Jesus "being lifted up on the cross"? You see, as it turns out, we are not that much different than the Jews following Moses, in fact, we may be worse. According to scripture, because of the world's sinfulness, we are considered to

be ENEMIES of God. By OUR sinful human nature WE would be worthy of death and destruction and are so by our own choice. During our Lenten season, it is this sinfulness which we ponder... During the Lenten season, it is a time to realize that "except for the grace of God," death and destruction was meant for us. However, John 3:16 tells us that "God so loved the world," meaning he loved it so much, that he did not desire for it to go to THE death and destruction that it deserved.

Yet there was in conflict. Mankind was stuck in a catch-22. You see, as a righteous God he could not let sin go unpunished. Therefore, since the wages of sin was death, Man must die. Yet, as a loving God, how could he allow his loved ones to die? That was the quandary, the paradox. What to do. Man was incapable of rescuing himself, because his very sinfulness which warranted death, also made it impossible for him to earn the forgiveness he needed. However, God had a plan. God solved this paradox, the quandary, by rescuing us himself.

The solution was not easy. The cost of that rescue was enormous. Even though John 3:16 simply states "God gave his one and only Son" held within that innocuous phrase lay a whole dramatic story. A story of betrayal by a close friend. About torture and humiliation. About hanging on a cross, slowly dying from asphyxiation because your lungs were stretched by the weight of your body as it hung from three nails piercing your hands and feet. When God gave his son, it was a gruesome sacrifice. It was a transfer of the punishment, which was due to sinners, due to us, due to the world, due to the enemies of God, transferred to Himself, to Jesus. Hidden in the words "God gave his son," is the terrible price which had to be paid for our redemption from death. Yet, because God so loved the world, he gave his only son. He sacrificed his son for us. Jesus willingly took on the punishment of death, for us. On the cross Jesus suffered, was crucified and died for sins which were not his own.

Having said that, however, as Jesus died on the cross, a great miracle occurred. As Jesus dies the curtain of the temple of God, in Jerusalem is torn in two, from top to bottom. That curtain in the temple symbolized the sin which separated us from God. The curtain separated us from the Holy place where God met with man. That curtain was the dividing point between man and God. Outside was man. Inside was God. Because of our sinfulness, we could never enter into the holy presence of God. But the cross changed all that, symbolized by the ripping of the curtain in the temple. Because of the cross, our sins were forgiven, the curtain was torn down. It symbolized that the dividing line between God and man was removed. Because of Christ we are now able to come into the presence of God. Because of the cross, we are not afraid of God. Like the serpent on the pole, the sign of the cross is now also a sign of entry into God's grace.

That cross of entry is an important part of our worship. It reminds us how we entered the presence of God. You enter into God's presence because you received the forgiveness of your sins. You entered into God's presence precisely because your sins

were nailed to a cross on a lonely Hill in Golgotha, 2000 years ago. By our looking to him... we received forgiveness and salvation. Because of that cross "we are forgiven." The cross is the entry into the presence of God. The cross is a symbol of healing. The cross is the entry into God's grace. The cross is a sign of God's forgiveness.

"We are forgiven." Three words. Three important words. So important that we should be careful not take these words for granted. Take a look at John 3:16, one of the world's most famous scripture verse. It starts "God so loved the world." This was a profound statement. God did not love only those people who would ultimately become Christians. God did not love only those who were good people. God loved the whole world. All of Mankind's sins were paid for. and the door to heaven was open... the door to a renewed relationship with God was opened. And the good news which God brings to us is that WHOEVER BELIEVES ON HIM, that is whoever, puts their trust in Jesus, whoever, believes the promise of forgiveness of sins for Jesus sake, will not perish but have eternal life. The reconciliation with God the creator, the God who loves us so much that He was willing to sacrifice his own son for our sake, has been accomplished. Our relationship with him has been restored. We need no longer be enemies of God. Because of Jesus death on the cross, those with faith in Jesus have a relationship so close that we are considered to be children of God. Because of Jesus, we have received eternal life and the right to live in Christ's kingdom. This is the powerful message of the Gospel. This is the powerful message of John 3:16. "Eternal life" does not just imply just "infinite time" with God. Eternal life has to do with your "quality of life" as well. "Eternal life" is "returning back home" back to the way it was in the garden of Eden, returning back to the way God created things to be.

Notice these four events:

- Looking on our sin
- Jesus' death paying for that sin
- Eternal life being offered to us.
- Faith in Christ receiving that gift.

These are the core parts of our service.

At the confession of sins, WE LOOK UPON our sin. We do not try to pretend that sin is not important or that God doesn't care. We confess its presence in ourselves. But we immediately look to Jesus for rescue. Because God has given his son for us, we know we have forgiveness of our sins. We know that eternal life is ours. That's what we celebrate. The entry into God's kingdom, the entry into the worship of God comes with confession of our sins, and the absolution, the forgiveness which He gives.

And that is not the only place. At communion we receive the cross of entry. At Communion we receive forgiveness. At communion, we are reminded that it is Jesus giving his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. It is Jesus' body and blood offered for us on a cross. We look to Jesus' suffering in our place for our sins. At

communion we experience anew, the forgiveness of our sins, won for us by the death of Jesus, and received by faith.

At your baptism you experienced the cross of entry. At your baptism, you experienced the forgiveness of sins. At your baptism the sign of the cross was placed both upon your forehead and upon your heart as a sign that your entry into the family of God. As Romans 6:4 tells us, we were united with Jesus, in a death like his, so that we would be united with him in a resurrection like his. At your baptism, you entered into eternal life, through the forgiveness of sins.

I want to make one last point, one last encouragement. While it is true that Jesus' death on the cross paid for all sins... the sins of all people, the sins in all time. the problem is that not all people have put their faith in Jesus, not all people know the Jesus, not all people know the Gospel. You know the Gospel. You have received that promise. You have that faith. I encourage you to share it with the people out there.
John 3:16

God so loved THE WORLD that he gave his only Son that WHOEVER BELIEVES in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Amen