

Holy Trinity – B
Text – John 3:14

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...

LIFTING UP THE SERPENT

An eminent scholar became bored during a long plane flight, so he woke up the sleeping man next to him to ask if he'd like to play a game. "I'll ask you a question," the scholar explained, "and if you don't know the answer, you pay me \$5. Then you ask me a question, & if I don't know the answer, I'll pay you \$50."

When the man agreed to play, the scholar asked him, "What's the distance from the earth to the moon?" Stumped, the man handed him \$5. "Ha!" said the scholar. "It's 238,857 miles. Now it's your turn."

The man was silent for a few moments, then asked, "What goes up a hill with three legs & comes down with four?" Puzzled, the scholar racked his brain to no avail. He took out his wallet & handed over the \$50. "Okay, okay, what is the answer?" the scholar asked. The man said, "I don't know either." So he gave a \$5 bill to the scholar & went back to sleep.

Some people enjoy playing games with questions. Others, like children at a certain age, will ask, "Why?" to every single thing you say. In the Gospel reading, Jesus & Nicodemus are throwing questions back & forth at each other:

From Nicodemus, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a 2nd time into his mother's womb & be born?" "How can these things be?" Jesus answered, "Are you the teacher of Israel & yet you do not understand these things? If I have told

you earthly things & you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

That’s the crux of the issue in our lives as well. How can we believe the heavenly things we read of in the Word of God? That may not seem like a problem to those of you who aren’t particularly hurting or struggling right now. If life is going smoothly, there’ve been no major bumps in the road; it’s not all that troubling to ‘say,’ “I believe in Jesus.” The struggle comes when circumstances are presented that make believing in Jesus appear foolish, laughable, or totally unreasonable.

That’s when we see if you’ve learned to apply your faith in Jesus to the real world, to the sinful world, & not just to some imaginary, make believe, pie in the sky kind of world. People who say they can be Christians without going to church are pretending to live in a fairy tale world. They underestimate the damage Satan can do through the struggles & hardship of life.

Going to church every Sunday may seem foolish. There are seldom any immediate or miraculous results from spending another hour or two sitting here. Giving 10%, or even 3%, of your income to the church may seem totally unreasonable when there’s rarely a financial windfall that can be directly connected with giving that money to the church.

It may seem laughable to believe that simply trusting God’s Word will take something hideously evil & use that to produce something incredibly good. Yet, that’s exactly what our Father in heaven did with the crucifixion of His Son upon the cross. God took something that was evil, & used it to produce eternal life for the very human race that perpetrated the sin.

How foolish it must have seemed to look at a bronze replica, for healing, of the poisonous snake that just bit you? Maybe you've known the fear & dread that comes with a life threatening injury. Maybe you've only seen it portrayed in the movies. In any event, the natural reaction of a human being is to panic, to do something drastic, & to do it quickly.

All God required was for the Israelites to be still & to know that He is God. They were to find healing, not in any rapid & drastic action of their own. They were to ignore their fear & pain, while simply looking up at a bronze serpent hanging upon a pole. If you dared to look you were healed. In the struggles you are facing in this life are you daring enough, are you foolish enough, to look for healing here at the foot of the cross? Or do you tell yourself the fairy tale, that you can be a Christian without going to church? **PAUSE**

The seniors in our high school have just graduated. In three short months most of them will be off to college. At 1st, they'll find little there that is familiar. There will be days when they do find loneliness & tears. Will they be foolish enough, & daring enough, to believe that Jesus, hanging on the cross, is what is truly needed to find comfort & healing? **PAUSE**

In our current economic climate does cutting back the percentage of your offerings seem like a prudent move? If you're in junior high, or high school, & have just begun to earn money, does it seem totally unreasonable to consider putting 10% of your meager income into the offering basket? Under those circumstances are you finding it troubling to 'believe' in Jesus?

Questions, & more questions, life is full of them, but our heavenly Father uses them, to teach us about heavenly things. The struggles we endure are used by Jesus to teach us about heavenly things. Each of us here that is a child of God has been given the gift of a repentant heart, but learning how to use that heavenly gift is anything but easy.

Nicodemus was not a Christian as he comes to Jesus for the purpose of asking his questions. By the time he helps bury the body of Jesus, he had become one. We should not be afraid of asking questions, but we should also be patient as our Lord works through the joys & the struggles of our lives to answer them.

If we were perfect students that patience wouldn't be necessary. It is always our sinful nature that creates any problem we have with learning. Our impatience itself shows that we lack a proper sense of eternity; we lack an understanding of heavenly things. God waited about 4000 years from the time He promised a Savior to Adam & Eve, until He sent Him. It's already been another 2000 since Jesus 1st arrived in the flesh, but we're frustrated if have to wait ten days, or ten years, to learn His answer.

The Israelites were grumbling against their heavenly Father, so He sent the fiery serpents among them. Many of the Israelites died from the bite. When they came to their senses & repented, God directed that a bronze serpent be put up on a pole & He promised that all who'd look upon it when bitten would be healed.

In the reading from the Gospel of John Jesus compares Himself to the serpent. Both of them were lifted up for the healing of others. It's not easy to fathom the depth of all that God was doing through the crucifixion of His Son. It may not even make sense to you, but we are called simply to believe, that in the face of any adversity, Jesus saves.

As He pointed out to Nicodemus, we observe the fact that there is wind, blowing & making sound. Yet educated people cannot control this earthly phenomenon. “In the same way,” when a person is recreated through Baptism, it yields observable evidence. It shows in the life of the converted person, but the regeneration itself is a deep mystery.

Conversion is God’s work in its entirety, including faith & the ability to believe in Jesus even when it appears foolish, laughable, or totally unreasonable. Since Jesus experienced every temptation known to us, He knows what it is to think it’s foolish to be in church regularly. He knows what it is to think it unreasonable to give 10% of your income to the church.

Jesus knows what it is to think it laughable that God can take something hideously evil & work everything together for our good. We may not have the answers to all the questions, but we do have a Savior that knows each of us personally. He knows us better than we know ourselves. Eventually, Jesus Himself is the answer to every question & to every fear.

Thinking we can get through life without Him is foolish, totally unreasonable & laughable. In fact, it is sin. The good news is that Jesus was lifted up on our behalf. He took the final ultimate sting of the serpent on our behalf. Jesus has taken the sting of death into Himself & rendered it powerless to destroy.

As all of us underestimate the damage Satan can do through the struggles & hardships of life, we also underestimate the miraculous ability of God to work those together for our good. The difference – do we believe in God’s ability to do so? That is the question Jesus answered for us as He stated in the world’s most famous Bible text:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all human understanding will guard your hearts & your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.