

The Holy Trinity
St. John 3:1-17

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In the wilderness, as the Hebrews made their way from Egypt to Canaan, the people grumbled against God and Moses. They had grown discouraged in their trek, for they had already spent a long time in the wilderness, away from what they, at that point, thought was a life of comfort, making bricks without straw, working in unbearable conditions, and beaten or killed for their inability to work and meet their quotas. But, compared to where they were in their exodus, they did have some comforts, like better and tastier foods, and at least, again, as they perceived it, had a chance to live. On top of that, they lived in the best part of Egypt, not the barren wilderness they were in. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.” (Number 21:5)

There were God’s people, rescued from slavery, being brought into their own land, incapable of trusting in Him who saved them. And to top it all off, they called the bread that He sent them worthless! What’s an almighty and just God to do? Well, point out their sin to them, of course. So, He sent fiery serpents—seraphim, it says in the Hebrew, a word for fiery or venomous ones—into the camp; they bit the people, and many of them died. (cf. Number 21:6)

The people realized the error of their ways. They approached Moses and confessed their sin to him. They asked him for a way to make the death by serpents stop. “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.” (Numbers 21:7) This is the work of the Law: it reveals the wrath of God to you; it kills you—when you sin against God, it declares to you that the just punishment for your sin is death. The fiery serpents were the proclamation of God’s wrath against the sin of the Hebrew children in the wilderness.

God instructed Moses, therefore, to make a snake—a seraph—and put it on a pole, “and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” (Numbers 21:8) The snake on the pole was fashioned out of bronze—*nechash nechosheth*, the Hebrew calls it, *snake of bronze*; by the time the people were worshipping the image in the time of Hezekiah, Moses’ bronze snake was called the *Nechushtan*—literally, the image of bronze. (cf. 2 Kings 18:4) However, for the Hebrews in the wilderness, it was salvation. If they felt the sting of fire from the serpent, he would look upon the *nechash nechosheth*—the snake of bronze—and live!

I have heard it said that there is a legend that says that the bronze serpent wasn’t merely the image of a serpent cast out of bronze, but was formerly a living fiery serpent that was bronzed. The very thing that was biting and killing the Hebrews now gives its life to be the image upon which they could look and live. I suppose it makes for a nice image—a substitute for the snake-bitten—but I could find nothing to verify that such a legend exists.

However, it is to this very thing—the snake of bronze—that Jesus refers when speaking one night with Nicodemus. The old Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, secretly pays the Rabbi a visit and confesses to Him the very thing the Pharisees knew about Him and feared: “[W]e know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” In a curious move, Jesus begins teaching Him about Baptism, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Think about it, however. Jesus tells Nicodemus the very thing he needs to hear, the very thing the Pharisees don’t want to hear. To a Pharisee, the kingdom of God comes by what they do. They were the exemplars of keeping the law—publicly at least. They sought salvation in the Law of God, but remember what the Law of God does. It reveals the wrath of God to you; it kills you; it shows you the just punishment for your sin: death. Jesus’ word to Nicodemus is contrary to that: you must be born again. This is not something that you do—not even something that you could choose to do; it happens to you!

Of course this didn't make sense to the old ruler. "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" No, Nicodemus. Now, you're just being confrontational. This second birth is not a fleshly birth, but a spiritual one—one of water and the Spirit. It does not come to you by way of anything you do, but by way of everything God has done for you. Matter-of-fact, you couldn't do this for yourself, and all of your works work against it. This second birth comes from outside of yourself; it is given to you by another. "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

"[U]nless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?" "How can baptism save?" might be another way Nicodemus would have asked that question, had he known Jesus was talking about baptism. "How can one be born of water and the Spirit? How does such a birth grant entrance into the kingdom of God?" Well, Nicodemus, how can looking at a bronze serpent save you from death? Because you have the Word of God on it!

Jesus then used the whole event to point to Himself. "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven." Look not to yourself, Nicodemus, but to the Son of Man—to Him who is standing before you and teaching you.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

Just like that snake of bronze in the wilderness, Jesus must also be lifted up. But Jesus is no serpent of bronze sent only for one time or one nation. The people the world over are snake-bitten, too. They, likewise need something to look to when they are bitten by the Serpent and are in danger of dying.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." The new and better serpent, made not of bronze, but of the same flesh and blood as Nicodemus and the Pharisees, as His mother and brothers and disciples, as the Romans and Greeks throughout Europe and the people the rest of the world 'round, as you, dear hearers, is sent by the Father to give eternal life. But that life comes at the cost of looking at Him, that is, looking upon Him as the One by whom you are given eternal life. It's no task at all, the burden is light for this is the work of God done in you, to believe in Him whom He has sent. (cf. Matthew 11:30; John 6:29) "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

Jesus was lifted up, just like the serpent in the wilderness. Drawing all men to Himself (cf. John 12:32), He was nailed to a cross and lifted up for all in Jerusalem to see. There, He bore the weight of all sins—the sins of the world—and gave His life as a ransom for all.

A ransom from what? From the snake bite of sin. You sin against God, and the crafty Serpent uses it to try and drag you down to hell with him. In your own flesh and blood, you are a sinner like your father, Adam, before you. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh..." For one thing, you are a fleshy creature like your parents. For another thing, that which comes forth from your flesh is nothing but sin. For it, you deserve to die.

That's what makes the image that the snake of bronze was at one time an actual snake work well here, for Jesus is the actual substitute who dies in the place of the snake-bitten, sinful mankind—in your place, dear hearer. There, on the cross, Jesus shed His blood as your propitiation and medicine against the fiery poison of the Serpent, Satan, who seeks to devour you in your sin. There, He gave His sinless flesh over to death for your life. Jesus is the antidote to the Serpent's poison, and He is so by giving His life in your place; the poison does not kill you, for it has already killed Him who took it from

you!

But unlike the serpent in the wilderness, Jesus' being lifted up carries more weight, you could say. The snake of bronze, when gazed upon after having been bitten, would have cured you for the day. Perhaps the next day, another snake would have bitten you again, and again you would have to look at the snake of bronze and live. "Sufficient for the day is its own trouble," I suppose. (cf. Matthew 6:34, used out of context) "When Jesus Christ is lifted upon the cross, the result isn't simply the healing of an illness, or the escape of death for a day; rather, it is the complete restoration of man to that which he was created to be in the first place, not for a day, but for an eternity!" In other words, Jesus' being lifted up is once-for-all—once for all mankind and once for all time!

So, Jesus bids you to believe in Him, and by His grace He gives you the faith to do so. It is a faith won for you on His cross, where He was sent by the Father to die for you. And it is a faith given to you by His Word and in the font, where the Water and the Word were applied to you and you were given the gift of the Holy Spirit. Father, Son, and Spirit—giving, working, and giving your salvation to you, when and where it pleases Him. "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." And you, dear Baptized, are His handiwork, created anew in Christ Jesus. (cf. Ephesians 2:10a)

And there is a good reason for this. Remember the snake bite of sin I mentioned earlier? You, dear hearers, are just like Nicodemus. You are like the Children of Israel in the wilderness. You are snake-bitten by that fiery Serpent, the devil, who seeks the overthrow of your Savior and your condemnation with him in the fiery lake. You grumble against God, wondering how long He will let you languish in a life you deem worthless, discounting the very gifts that He gives you and denying His grace. You question how it is God can do such marvelous things because something like being born again sounds as silly as crawling back into your mother's womb!

Therefore, because the Father values you just like He loved the Hebrews in the wilderness, He sent the Son to bear in His own flesh the marks and stripes and condemnation for your sin on the cross, whereon He was lifted up. The Son gave His life for your ransom, died, but rose again, and is ascended to the right hand of the throne of God—for you! From there, He sends the Spirit to bring to your remembrance all that He has taught you, to bring to you the very fruit of Jesus' sacrifice: forgiveness, life, and salvation.

And these are the gifts that the Father lavishes upon you for the sake of the Son by way of the Holy Spirit. And He uses means to convey and impute them to you: Word, a called and ordained man, water, and bread and wine. How can these things be? How can these simple means do such great things? How did looking at a bronze snake save them? Because you have the Word of God on it!

It was a very unconventional work of God to have Moses fashion a snake of bronze for the snake-bitten people to look at and live. Likewise, it is unconventional and unexpected that the Father would offer His own Son to death—the condemnation of His very own Law for those who would otherwise be under the condemnation of that Law. It is unconventional and unexpected to have a Lord who offers Himself as a sacrificial Lamb only to rise again from a new grave. It is unconventional and unexpected to be able to look upon Jesus lifted up on the cross and there find your life—eternal life. It is unconventional and unexpected that God works upon you by simply words, written and spoke, a bit of water, and a bite of bread and sip of wine. And unconventionally and unexpectedly, the Spirit of God moves like the wind through this place, and gives exactly that which you need: that for Christ's sake, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.