

Jesus said [to Nicodemus], “Just 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.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

There are images of light that expand our awareness; images that lift up our hearts and minds and souls.

Some present astonishing pictures of light in the physical world; the light outside ourselves, like the image on your bulletin. What appears to be an incredibly enormous eye in the deepness of space is actually the light from a star that exploded more than 2,000 years ago.

Other images convey awe-inspiring encounters of light in the spiritual realm; the light within and between us. Let me introduce you to an image that radiates with the meaning of this Gospel reading.

The historic city of Weimar in central Germany is home to the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, where Martin Luther preached and Johann Sebastian Bach performed. Walking down the central aisle past a Gothic baptismal font and an imposing baroque pulpit takes you to the foot of the chancel.

And there you see a major work of 16th century art hanging above a simple altar that looks remarkably like our own. The painting by the Renaissance artist, Lucas Cranach the Younger, has been hailed as "the single most important visual monument of German Reformation."

In the center of a triptych entitled “Christ on the Cross,” Cranach has painted a simple but dominating wooden cross bearing the crucified Jesus. At the foot of the cross, stands a pure white lamb holding a banner that reads in Latin “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of world.” Just to the right, John the Baptizer points with one hand to Jesus and with his other to the lamb in a visual expression of the fraction anthem, the *Angus Dei*, that we chant just before we come to the table for communion.

Now, if you aren’t intentional, you might miss a less familiar scene behind the figures in the foreground. Off in the distance, Cranach has painted a group of tents surrounding another wooden cross holding a large bronze serpent.

This is the scene from Numbers that we heard this morning. The desert-wandering Israelites afflicted with a snake bite could look up at the image and be healed.

In the Gospel, we heard John’s Jesus saying to his friend Nicodemus: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of Man be lifted up.” Both were acts that provided something for God to use in making people whole. What Cranach has depicted gives us a way to see and recognize this double “lifting up” on a cross – one of the serpent and one of Jesus.

Acts of lifting up that bring healing down.

The cross is not how God punishes, or the way we pay ransoms or debts to God. The lifting of Christ on the cross is for healing. For making people whole.

The cross in Cranach’s painting and in John’s Gospel is a source of glory, evidence of God’s loving presence, not God’s retribution or abandonment. Jesus is lifted so that we will turn our eyes, physically and spiritually, to the cross that reveals God’s holy, “whole-making” love for the entire Kosmos.

The revelation of God’s unconditional love is so incredible that we tend to shrink it as though we might finally make sense of it. We pick up

one verse like a hammer and see nothing but nails all around us. We turn “for God so loved the world...” into a contract for fire insurance and start acting as if people who don’t buy that contract are excluded from God’s love forever.

Fortunately, we hear this Gospel in the middle of a conversation that Jesus is having with Nicodemus, a religious authority and friend. Nicodemus who also does not understand.

Right up until he does.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark. We will hear about him again when he defends his friend Jesus in the spiritual darkness of the self-serving authorities. Nic will show up for the last time – in daylight – when he and Joseph of Arimathea come for the body of Jesus.

Nicodemus is as confounded by Jesus as those of us who think that people who don’t buy our interpretation of “get-out-of-hell-free” will be punished by God for all eternity. Nicodemus is bewildered. Until, that is, until he is enlightened.

We follow the example of Nicodemus, if we stay curious and open-minded enough to ponder what Jesus said: “...God sent the Son into the Kosmos not that he might pass judgment on the Kosmos, but in order that the Kosmos might be saved through him.”

Some parts of the church are quick to point out that what Jesus said next, in eloquent Elizabethan English, was this: “He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

Case closed.

Well, not so fast. Because this is where things get interesting. The word that we render into English as “judgement” or “condemned” does not refer to eternal death or hell. John’s Greek word, *krisis*, refers to the revealing of a decisive moment.

That’s what Jesus is describing to Nicodemus. Any moment when any person looks to the uplifted holy light of God for healing, they can choose to whether or not to trust the love of God to be made whole.

Jesus promises his friend that God's mercy will be made manifest in the lifting up of the Son to become a visible sign of God's grace poured out for the world.

Mystical encounters of the cross of Christ still reveal decisive moments; openings, if we will take them, to see and take into ourselves God's life-affirming love. Those who cannot imagine or will not allow that God brings love rather than punishing hatred are lost to the darkness of their separation, lost to despair and the fearfulness of this world.

What John's Jesus is explaining to Nicodemus is that the Son of Man must be lifted as the revelation of God's love for the created world. And in his masterful painting, Cranach gives us a visual confirmation.

Venomous snakes and other details in the painting represent the presence and consequences of sin in our world. Yet, there in the foreground, just to the left of the cross, Cranach depicts the Risen Christ, having just emerged from his tomb clothed in a blood-red cape.

Jesus holds the lamb's flagstaff; translucent, because it is made of light. He has plunged the staff into the mouth of a diseased, horned monster – the embodiment of evil. With his left foot, Christ stands on the dying beast's neck and with his right, he stands on the chest of a skeleton – the phantom of death.

The crucified and Risen Christ looks directly at us, his eyes beaming compassion, as he destroys *evil* and *death*. Not harming a single human being, mind you, but putting an end to the threats that intimidate the people of light.

By placing the Risen Christ beside the crucified Jesus, both lifted up, Cranach captures the decisive moment in which we are free to choose the dark forces of diminishment, fear and death; the forces that decrease the Kosmos into a world much smaller than God intends. Or we are free to open our hearts and minds and be welcomed into the liberating light that makes the Kosmos whole.

Turning our eyes to the uplifted One, we can choose to be in right relationship with God and God's creation *or* will we can choose the sins of exclusion and separation. We can live *now*, joyfully acting with compassion *or* we can cling to the hope of a passing grade at the hour of our death. We can spread the life-giving light of God's peace and healing *or* we can quiver in the stifling darkness of evil's rage and despair.

The revelation is on-going. The decisive moment is now.

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