

[Spirituality](#)

[Pencil Preaching](#)



by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 13, 2020

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)



“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up” (John 3:13).

Num 21:4b-9; Phil 2:6-11; John 3:13-17

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross is an early liturgical commemoration of the central paradox of the Christian faith, how the Lord of glory, Jesus Christ, is inseparable from the shame of the crucifixion. We know from the earliest preaching and the letters of St. Paul that presenting Jesus as Savior met disbelief and even ridicule when it was revealed that he had died on a Roman cross, the most ignominious death possible inflicted in the ancient world.

What is for us is a familiar image expressed in jewelry and wall art was an unspeakable scene of torture and humiliation reserved for rebellious slaves and insurrectionists, victims displayed near the crossroads as a deterrent, left for days to die of slow asphyxiation and loss of blood. Today’s readings bring together three Scriptures that provide the church’s explanation of how the crucifixion of Jesus fulfilled his mission to save the world from sin and death.

In Exodus, we read about Moses countering a swarm of saraph serpents whose bite sickened the Hebrews in the desert by elevating a bronze image of one for people to look at. Those who did were saved. This became the origin of the paradox that the curse is also the cure, the medical basis for vaccines. The Greek *caduceus*, two intertwined snakes on a pole, became the symbol of medicine.

The hymn quoted by Paul in Philippians 2:6-11 exalts Jesus for humbling himself to accept death on a cross. This act of divine *kenosis*, or self-emptying, was the surest sign of God’s overwhelming love for us and the invitation to disciples to do the same

by losing their lives for the sake of Christ as the path to life.

The fourth Gospel combines these ideas as the meaning of the “lifting up” of Jesus, a phrase with multiple meanings applied to his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. Those who see, that is, believe in, this sign, are saved. What to the world is a sign of utter failure and defeat is in fact the triumph of love over sin and death. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes him might not perish but might have eternal life” (John 3:16).

One simple way to reflect on this paradox and the reversal it holds is an optical exercise with the small image accompanying this reflection. Stare for 30 seconds at the image, then close your eyes or look at a white surface. What is a negative becomes a positive that reveals a familiar figure.

Advertisement