Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM” (John 8:28).

Nm 21:4-9; Jn 8:21-30

In this passage from the fourth Gospel, the last sign that identifies Jesus as “I AM,” the name for God revealed to Moses from the burning bush, prefigures his death. The phrase, “When you lift up the Son of Man” links him to two key Scriptures.

One is today's first reading from Numbers 21:4-9, an account of the attack of saraph serpents in the desert on the people when they complain about lack of food and drink. Moses makes a bronze image of the serpent and lifts it up so that anyone who looks at it can be healed. This is like vaccination, when a dose of the poison becomes the cure.

The other reference is to the "Son of Man" from the Book of Daniel (7:14-14), a mysterious figure, both human and divine, who comes on the clouds on the day of judgment. This title is one of the few that Jesus accepts, literally calling himself a "human being," but for the author of the fourth Gospel he is also the ultimate representative of humanity before God, the "Son of Man."

So, in this confrontation with his opponents, the fourth Gospel has Jesus as this human-divine figure God has sent to save the world. What is so astonishing about this claim is that when the two passages are combined, they reveal God's love for a sinful world when Jesus, the Son of Man, is "lifted up," a reference to his death on the cross. With ultimate irony, Jesus is displayed for all to see, a convicted criminal executed to deter others from following him.

In effect, Jesus' moment of glory will be his terrible death. Those who can "see" (believe) this paradox will grasp that what seems to be a curse is in fact our redemption. By his death we are given life. By his suffering we are set free from sin. Jesus fulfills Passover as our Exodus from slavery to freedom. Jesus offers his life as the Paschal Lamb so that we, his brothers and sisters, might be lifted up by his resurrection..

This is the Gospel of Mercy, God's unconditional love revealed in Jesus. It is pure gift to anyone who opens his or her heart to the ineffable mystery of God, who "so loved the world that he gave his beloved Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Do we see it? Do we believe it?

Our long Lenten journey brings us to this single act of faith, and on it hangs eternity. Jesus will lay down his life out of love for you and me. How can we not respond? Good Friday is about to reveal Easter Sunday.