Text: John 3:14-21

**Text**

Jesus explicitly ties the cross to the episode of the old testament reading. It might be better to hear the opening verse: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so also it is necessary that they Son of Man be lifted up.” It would be harder to make a more explicit connection. So I think it is worth pulling out a couple of key items from the Old Testament story.

The first thing that I want to pull out is the cause of the episode. Israel had been wondering in the wilderness for a long time at this point. They are closer to the end of the 40 years than the beginning, but exactly how long isn’t said. But what Israel does has not changed. They are impatient. The spoke against God and Moses. They state that Egypt was better. They complain about the manna and quail and water. To build each of those up a little. God has taken them out of slavery in Egypt, and they are longing to go back to slavery. God has promised to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey, but because he didn’t teleport them their it is taking too long. The things that God has given them to sustain them along the way are despised. Anything but the manna and the water from the rock. And all of their anger is directed against God as not fulfilling his promises and the prophet Moses through whom God is delivering Israel.

It's a picture of the toxic nature of our sin. Who we are doesn’t change. Not even with years in the wilderness. We still find ourselves angry at God and longing for Egypt and slavery to everything Egypt represents. We still find the bread and water of God unsatisfactory. Because we haven’t been given the promised rose garden on our timetable. And so we are afflicted with fiery serpents. And if you were to have read the pastor’s corner those fiery serpents are an interesting phrase. It is highly likely that we are still afflicted with these fiery serpents. They goad us on toward the death that our sin naturally leads us. Paul’s picture in the epistle lesson of “the power of the air, the spirit now at work in the sons of disobedience.”

The second thing to pull out of the episode is a hard truth. Their sin has been given this terrible symbol of the fiery serpent. And as is always our prayer when we are able to identify the results – the punishments – of our sins, Israel begs God to take the snakes away. But that is not what God does. They repent. “We have sinned…take the serpents away from us.” But what God does is have Moses lift a symbol of the sin and the punishment and make a promise. If you look, if you see it, you will live. The snakes are still out there. Israel will still be afflicted. But God will save them from themselves and bring them to life. Not by taking away the snakes, but by making them visible. By enabling his people to walk on in their midst. To tread over the vipers.

**Christology**

When we look at the cross we should see the same thing. This is the death that we deserved. The agony and blood and horror of that thing would be the natural end result of our sin. This is what the fiery serpents, the spirit now at work in the sons of disobedience, would drive us toward.

When we look at the cross we should see the same thing. Everything that we deserved has been put on the crucified one. He became sin for us. Such that if we look at the cross – see it – we shall live. We shall live not by being teleported immediately out of this life. But we shall live in the midst of it. We shall live because of the promise of God. We shall life because of faith in the promise given by the cross. That our sin has been defeated and paid for. “That whoever believes in him will have eternal life.”

And I think this passage from John is one of the few places where God gives us an answer to a why question. Why has God done it this way? Why did not God just used a teleporter? Why do we live in the midst of the wilderness. Why to we contend daily with fiery serpents? Why is this raised image given us?

First, so that we might see the love of God. “God so loved the world that he gave his only son.” Christ became sin for us. The sinless and eternal son, became incarnate. The one who would command legions of angels. Maybe even command at a word the fiery serpents, became the very image of sin. When we look at the Son of Man lifted up, we can know the love of God for all the World. He does not spare his son, his only son. For those who would prefer Egypt, he still sent his son. For those who would despise his gifts, the cross still stands. Your sins are there. They are no longer yours. You may live.

And that is the second reason I think. If we could see the love of God we might see that “God did not send his son to condemn the world, but to save it.” And to save it, as painful as it might be, requires that we see ourselves rightly. “This is the judgement, the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil…but whoever does what is true comes into the light.”

Israel had to stare at the symbol of the snake – recognize their sin. And the cross does function as the light in the same way. If you think of sin but lightly, see who bears the awful load. If you don’t think sin is that big a deal, look at its effects. And Jesus would say if you want to see its continuing effects you just need to look at the least of these and you will see Christ. Don’t think that we have outgrown the cross. There are crosses on every major corner. And the light has come that we might understand this.

But unlike Israel looking at the snake, we look at the light of Christ. We look at the beloved of the Father. We look at our brother. And know that he is risen. This cross is not the final Word of God. Because Christ did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. He was lifted up that we might come into the light. Both by recognizing our sin – yes, the light of the cross exposes our evil deeds. But also by recognizing our salvation – even more the cross tells us God loves us and would not see the sinner die. But our Salvation has come and created a way past death.

**Moral**

Out of the love of the Father for all the world, he has sent this light. He has given His grace. That we by faith might be saved. Faith in this work of Christ. Not our work, because we like Israel still contend daily with sin. But he has carried them all.

And in that light we should recognize two things. We can’t keep doing them. We are not like the rest of mankind who carry on in the dark. We have seen, and we know what our evil acts are. There are the burden placed on our salvation. We once walked in them. We can return to them. We can desire to go back to Egypt. But we must not. In the Spirit given us by the water of baptism. By the bread given us for this wilderness walk in the sacrament, we must struggle to put down the acts of darkness.

And instead of walking that way, we walk in the good works, which God has prepared beforehand for us to walk in. We must walk in the light. And clearly see that our deeds our carried out in God.

**Eschatological**

Israel does eventually reach the promised land. Their wilderness walk is not forever, but for 40 years, a full length of time.

And it has been given to each of us to walk in this wilderness for a full length of time. This mortal flesh – like the mortal flesh of that entire generation including Moses – does not make the promised land. This flesh that we struggle against daily to walk in the light. It wants daily to take us back into the darkness. It hate the light. This flesh ceases, it dies in the wilderness.

But it dies not condemned. It is put into the ground in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. God shall bring all of Israel to the promised land. You will not perish eternally but have eternal life.

That is the promise of God seen in the light of that cross. Lifted up for all the world to see. Look up, for Golden is the hour. The first light of your salvation is seen here. The first light of the promised land that we see from afar by faith. Amen.