**John 3:14-21**

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. **16** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. **18**  Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **19**  And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. **20**  For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. **21** But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

**“Life Looks Up”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. The universal symbol for poison is the “skull and crossbones.” Of course, some have tried to change this because of fear over misinterpretation. Skull and crossbones can also be a sign for pirates that easily attract the interests of children. They have tried other symbols for poison like a green face sticking out a tongue. However, the skull and crossbones are what stick. Some symbols are so potent that they are just plain hard to change.

John 3:16 is a standard verse many know. Some have even labeled it to be, “The Gospel in a nutshell.” What is unique about those words, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son…” is how closely Jesus ties what he says to a symbol that stuck out in the Old Testament. He told Nicodemus, “And 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.”

One of the best parts of Lent is how the whole church must gather to the same symbol. God sets this standard in the sacrifice of His Son. The cross of Christ steals the show! What was once a universal symbol for death has now become a universal symbol for life. There is only one Savior of sinners. He alone is the way, the truth, and the life for any to come to the Father. The ultimate grace God gives is the cure kept safe in His Son.

God lifts up the cure no one else can conjure up in a cursed world. Humanity simply deals with one sickness after another, makes one law to outdo another law, and wins battles only to fight another war. The poison of sin runs through the blood stream of all people, cultures, and generations. Yet, God has better plans for those cursed without a cure. The Father gave His Son to the world for only in Him could the cure ever come to be. Unlike a bronze serpent lifted up, Jesus by wiling obedience had to offer Himself up to the cross.

The remedy flows out generously from the uplifted Son of God. Whoever believes in Him has eternal life. Since Jesus is not under the curse of sin, He tells Nicodemus and the entire world, “I am the cure!” Better than hearing the doctor say, “Take two and call me in the morning.” What pours out of Christ’s sacrifice is every blessing of life and salvation in His Name. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...” Faith in not a choice, but the truth God shines into us to see what Christ chooses to do for sinners.

The cure lifted up is for all to receive against the Devil’s venom. His poison is deadlier than most give credit. It festers within sinful hearts, eats at relationships, and infects every part of life. Sinners can even deny or despise the cure God gives! Luther says, “It is expressly stated here that Christ came and removed the sin of the world so completely that it is entirely deleted, entirely forgiven. But to refuse the Helper, to refuse to hear the Man who abolishes sin, and, more than this, to want to kill Him and to persevere in sin... It is terrible to hear this proclamation, which brings remission of sin and release from death, slandered as heresy and to see this Helper persecuted.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Whatever we sense of guilt, disgrace, and sin will burn like the poison it is. Let us not blame the cure as if God can do better or as if God does not care about the suffering. Everything of our curse has fallen upon the crucified Jesus. The father of all lies, the murderous serpent, seeks to twist this tree of life where Christ is the sacrifice for many. To hide from His suffering and death for my life is to miss what Jesus said. “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.” You are part of that world; part of that saving God has made complete and perfect in His Son. As much as the Law condemns, as shameful as sin may be, or as troubled as a conscience can feel Christ by His cross reigns over the devil’s lies.

Such a cure effectively works to silence death with life. This is the life Israel received by looking to the bronze serpent trusting the Lord’s Word against what threatened them. This is the life Jesus proclaimed to Nicodemus at the dead of night, but turned out to be a fiery trial of His cross for all. This is the life where now water, bread and wine lift up Christ to be for any by the promise of His Word. The effectiveness of the cure remains thankfully on Christ lifted up. It is troubling to our works and trivial to our ways, but God works for all to believe that in Christ we do not perish.

Rather than the skull and crossbones marking life, we have a better promise come out of baptism. The crucified Savior lifts us up from looking down. He declares by His sacrifice the poison of sin that infected you this week is forgiven. The risen Lord lifts us up from sorrows over Death. By conquering the cross, He proves who holds the keys of life for all to believe in His Name. The ascended Jesus lifts us up from the darkness. What remains of the cross is the Church’s glory of love for we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

The ultimate grace God gives is the cure kept safe in His Son. Since the greater gift of life cannot fail and must stand, the lesser gifts of God’s mercy daily only become grace upon grace. Cures are hard to come by, but Christ is unwilling to hide what He gives for you. Cures can be costly, but Christ has paid the price in full without your help. Cures do cause some discomfort, but Christ carries the weight by His cross as you follow Him. Lent leads the whole Church to what God lifts up for sinners everywhere.

Some symbols are potent they stick out like the bronze serpent on a pole, but Christ is no symbol. He is the Son of God the sacrifice sent by the Father. He is the cure that speaks forgiveness to repent sinners. He is the cure that washes any clean to be His saints. He is the cure that feeds weary bodies and souls with His life to eat and drink. He is the cure that no one can live without and God lifts Him up out of love. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.

1. Luther, M. (1999, c1957). *Vol. 22*: *Luther's works, vol. 22 : Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1-4* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Jn 3:20). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)