

He Was Lifted Up

**Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado
March 29, 2009**

Last Sunday, the First Lesson contained this verse:

Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Numbers 21:9

The Gospel Reading contained this verse:

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.

John 3:14-15

Pastor Pederson led us in an exploration of this message pointing to the lifting up of Jesus on cross being the means we are saved and receive life, hope, and salvation.

Today, we read from John 12 in which Jesus declares:

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

John 12:32

That statement is followed immediately with the author's interpretation which reads:

He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

John 12:33

Being "lifted up" for Jesus was first being nailed to the cross. The second "lifted up" was the resurrection, or being raised from the dead. That's the theme that we'll celebrate in its fullness two weeks from today. But today, we are still in the season of Lent, a season of preparation and anticipation of The Day of the Resurrection. That means our focus is on being lifted up on the cross.

Christians understand that Jesus was both human and divine. Not 50% human and 50% divine, but 100% human and 100% divine. He shared our humanity completely while also being the full revelation of the Father. That is our faith, an understanding that we embrace without the need to provide logical defense of this faith proclamation.

What does it mean that Jesus was 100% human? What does it mean that we are human? Everyone one present this morning was born of a sperm and egg, carried in our mother's womb, and delivered on what we call our birthday. So was Jesus except that he "was conceived by the Holy Spirit (and) born of the Virgin Mary." His birth was a human birth as was ours. Also, he "died and was buried." Death awaits all of us, sometimes at the conclusion of a long life well lived, sometimes prematurely due to accident or illness,

and sometimes imposed through war, violence, disease, persecution, or oppression. Nevertheless, we are all born and will die. That is our human experience. Jesus shared birth, life, and death with us as a human, 100% human.

Such is the common experience of all humans. We differ in many respects: where we live, when we live or lived, our heritage, nationality, height, coloring, fingerprint, voice, personality, allegiances, talents, language, economic condition, housing, age, traumas, challenges, accomplishments, contributions and other factors. What gives us a common human experience is that we were born, lived (some for minutes and others over a century), and died. The same with Jesus.

He also suffered, not just the pain of being nailed to the cross, having a spear thrust into his side, and a crown of thorns on his head. He suffered misunderstanding by his family, rejection by most of the Pharisees, desertion by his disciples, and condemnation by the Passover crowd gathering in Jerusalem. He suffered alienation. From the time he began his ministry, he engaged in the struggle of faithfulness to the Father's will, a struggle with which we can all identify as we try to live faithful lives in the midst of suffering, struggles, temptation, and evil. We are called to faithful obedience, and sinners that we are we fail. Then we are prone to minimize that failure by saying, "Well, I'm only human. Instead of dismissing our failures in faithfulness, we are called to confess them.

A mother called from the bottom of the stairs up to her son one Sunday morning saying it was time to climb out of bed and get ready for church. The son grumbled some answer like "in a couple of minutes; I'm not ready to get up yet." The mother replied, "We need to leave in a half hour." And the son grunted, "I heard you." About ten minutes later, the mother, again from the bottom of the stairs called, "Are you up yet?" Her son replied, "I don't want to get up and go to church." The mother responded, "You have to, you're the pastor."

That's a silly example of the struggle of faith and the call to obedience which is addressed to all of us. When we read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we see Jesus continually engaged in struggle – with the Father, with his disciples, with his fellow Israelites, with the needs of others. He is faithful always.

At times, I receive the impression that Christians should not have to struggle and suffer, that life should be fine – comfortable, happy, and pain-free. Was Jesus? To be human is to experience discomfort, anguish, pain, and sorrow – as well as joy, pleasure, hope, and fulfillment. To be faithful to the Lord is also a struggle, and we know that Jesus was not only born and died, but that in the meantime he engaged in the struggle of faith. From the very beginning of his ministry – his 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil to being lifted up on the cross. Jesus identifies with our births, our pending deaths, and our daily conundrums of life. The difference, obviously, is that he was faithful unto death, and we fail. The message of the Lord Jesus is that because of his faithfulness, we are forgiven for our unfaithfulness.

The Gospel reading for today contains a very difficult statement from the Lord Jesus:
Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world
will keep it for eternal life.

John 12:25

Hate my life? Do you? Most of the time when people speak like that, we want them to receive help from professionals who can counsel them. How can we possibly understand these words of Jesus? One commentator wrote that this statement about “hate your life”; it is another instance of Jewish hyperbole. What a relief. We don’t have to take it seriously! Jesus is here challenging us to so frame and focus our loyalty to him that nothing supersedes that loyalty, and that such a singular loyalty to him brings everything else into focus.

We are to take the message seriously: Jesus only; with all that comes between our births and our deaths, all the suffering, joy, heart-break, pleasure, conflict, selfishness, satisfaction, and sin, he alone can truly be with us, be our constant companion, and shine the light of the Father’s love on our paths.

The Gospel reading for today declares to us the humanity of Jesus, telling us that he was lifted up on the cross where he bled and died. He is totally human. We await the full declaration of his being lifted up from the grave to live forever. He is totally divine. His crucifixion speaks of his humanity. His resurrection speaks of his divinity. As we come to the conclusion of Lent with Palm/Passion Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, we will give great emphasis to the humanity of Jesus which only increases our gratitude for his great faithfulness and his eternal presence with us right now. Amen.