

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT - B

It has been a year since the worldwide Covid pandemic led to the closing of our churches.

Since then more than 500,000 people have died in the United States alone.

The human race has suffered much during the past months, and many people continue to experience losses of various kinds.

Hopefully we have done our best to cooperate with wearing masks and social distancing.

Now we have vaccines which hold the promise of protection of further spread.

We thank God for the scientists, doctors, and nurses for all they have done to serve our hurting world, and we pray for a swift end to the spread of this disease.

And so on this Laetare Sunday which marks the halfway point on our Lenten journey to Easter we rejoice with grateful hearts to the Lord!

In today's gospel Jesus makes a reference to an event in the Old Testament: the lifting up of the serpent in the desert.

This happened during the Exodus when the people were being led by God through the desert to the Promised Land.

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The people complained against God, saying that they had been better off as slaves in Egypt because at least there they had plenty of food and drink.

In punishment God sent serpents which bit the people so that many of them died.

Recognizing their sin, the people begged Moses to intercede for them with God.

God had mercy upon them, and instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and mount it on a pole.

Whoever looked upon the bronze serpent would be healed.

It's interesting to note that the image of a serpent on a pole is used as a symbol of the medical profession.

Jesus tells us that just as the serpent was lifted up in the desert, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him might be saved."

Down through the centuries Christians have looked upon the image of their crucified Savior seeking healing from their sins.

Crucifixes often have an inscription mounted upon them: INRI which stands for "*Jesus Nazareus Rex Iudaeorum*," that is "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

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I would suggest that whenever we look at a cross or crucifix, we imagine an inscription that reads "John 3:16."

It is the biblical citation from today's Gospel:

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."

This is the heart of the Christian faith which Paul sums up in the profound phrase: "God who is rich in mercy."

Paul goes on to explain the depths of God's mercy:

"... because of his great love for us, even when we were dead in our sins, brought us to life with Christ."

This is the mystery of the mercy of God displayed so often throughout salvation history.

God loves us even though we are sinners.

We see an example of God's compassion and mercy in today's first reading.

God continuously sent his erring people the prophets to call them back from their infidelity.

Even his punishment of the people was an exercise of his mercy, just like a doctor must sometimes break a misaligned bone in order to set it correctly.

God sent his chosen people into exile so that they might long for him and return to him with their whole hearts.

Finally, God uses the foreign King Cyrus as an instrument of his mercy to return the people to Jerusalem.

All of this is a foreshadowing of God's work of immeasurable grace, the free and unmerited gift of his merciful love poured out through his Son Jesus.

St. Paul powerfully reminds us that we have been saved by grace through faith.

We cannot save ourselves, and even our desire to be saved is God's free and gracious gift.

As Paul says so beautifully, "We are his handiwork."

During this Lenten season we reflect not so much on what we do for God, but on what God has done for us.

Do you and I see ourselves as God's handiwork?

Do we recognize God's grace at work in our hearts?

Let us gaze often upon the precious Cross of Christ, whose self-sacrifice makes it possible for us to imitate him in our daily living.