

# "FIRST IMPRESSIONS"

## EXALTATION OF THE CROSS (A)

SEPT. 14, 2025

Numbers 21:4b-9; Psalm 78; Philippians 2: 6-11; John 3: 13-17

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Dear Preachers:



Lent begins on Wednesday, February 18, 2026. So why are we celebrating the Exaltation of the Holy Cross in mid-September? Before we turn to today's scripture readings, let's reflect on the feast.

Some history: The feast dates back to the fourth century. Tradition holds that St. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, discovered the True Cross in Jerusalem around the year 326, during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This is a very ancient feast, sometimes called the Triumph of the Cross. But unlike Good Friday, which focuses on Christ's suffering, this feast

highlights the victory of the Cross. Through the Cross came salvation and new life for us. Once a symbol of humiliation and execution, it is now a sign of God's love, triumph, and glory.

What is the "glory" of the Cross? Sadly, we have become so accustomed to seeing the Cross—inside and outside churches, on rosaries, around people's necks, even as tattoos, or home décor—that we often miss its deeper meaning. Sometimes it is reduced to a fashion statement or a good-luck charm. Because it is so omnipresent, we can lose the sense of shock it originally evoked—the cruelty and pain it represented.

The first generation of Christians was not blind to the barbaric reality of crucifixion. They had seen their messianic hero tortured, bloodied, mercilessly nailed to a crossbar, and lifted up for all to see and mock. To unbelievers, it was unthinkable that this hated symbol of defeat and death could be cherished as a sign of salvation and a pattern for life.

As followers of Jesus who "exalt" the Cross, we are called to live as witnesses to his life—a life that often stood in contrast to the world. The glory of the Cross is seen in those who follow Christ daily in word and deed. Through his death and resurrection, our lives now show forth his presence in the world.

Our Gospel today comes from the account of Nicodemus' nighttime visit to Jesus, where Jesus explains God's saving plan by recalling Israel's time in the wilderness. The first reading from Numbers presents the scene: the people complain against God and are punished when God sends fiery serpents among them.

When they repent, they are healed by looking upon the bronze serpent Moses lifted up on a pole: "...whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, they lived."

Centuries later, the author of the Book of Wisdom described Moses' bronze serpent as a symbol of salvation. That is why today's reading from Numbers is paired with the Gospel: just as the serpent was lifted up for Israel's healing, so too Jesus is "lifted up" on the Cross so that "everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Today's feast reminds us that discipleship involves embracing the Cross in our own lives. We are encouraged not to glory in worldly power, but in the power of God revealed in weakness. The feast proclaims that suffering and death are not the final word—for through the Cross come resurrection, hope, and glory.

In Israel's tradition, the wilderness was remembered in two ways: as a place of intimacy and covenant with God, and as a place of testing—a test Israel often failed. Today's reading from Numbers highlights that failure.

And yet, how profound and incomprehensible is God's love for us! John proclaims that God's love is total and universal—not limited to a privileged few, not restricted to those who already believe. God's love is for the whole world, so complete that God did not spare even the Son in order to reveal it.

First, God's love was shown in the Incarnation, and then in Christ's saving death: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." John says that God both "gave" and "sent" the Son. "Gave" stresses the generosity of God's gift; "sent" underscores the mission entrusted to Jesus. Either way, we are the beneficiaries of this divine love.

The Cross was the instrument God used to conquer sin and death. By it, the way to God has been opened for us. Through the Cross we die to sin and rise to new life. What a mystery: that what once brought death has become the path to life! No wonder we "exalt" the Cross today.

In his book, "Seasons of Grace: A Spiritual Companion to the Liturgical Year," Walter Kasper reminds us that the Cross does not "prettify" the truth about humanity and our sins (p. 107). It reveals us as we really are and exposes what we do to one another. He calls it the "unvarnished truth"—a truth that, once faced, can set us free.

When we look to the Cross, we confront the difficult truth about human sin. Yet the Cross also reveals the even greater truth of God's mercy: God forgives, reconciles, and saves in love. Instead of condemning humanity, God offers salvation through the Cross.

We live in its shadow. First, it reveals the truth of our lives: we are broken, finite, and unable to save ourselves. But the Cross also reveals the depth of God's mercy and reconciliation—gifts we cannot earn but receive freely through Christ.

A young woman shows off her newly-received engagement ring. A newly married couple wear wedding bands that were blessed and exchanged, along with life-promises, at their wedding ceremony. These material signs are reminders and assurances that they will be there for each other "in good times and in bad." When troubles do arise a glance at the ring serves as a reassurance of a commitment made in love.

The Cross is that for us – a reminder of a promise God made in love with us and was fulfilled when "the Son of Man [was] lifted up." We have not finished our individual desert treks yet and there probably

will be lots of missteps before our journey is finished. In the meanwhile, we do not lose hope as we face our shortcomings and the road that still lies in front of us. Lest we get discouraged and fear dropping out along the way, we look to the Cross and the promise of continual help it offers to us. God has given us concrete signs of God's love for us; in Jesus, the Word made flesh and in the Cross which he embraced on our behalf.

**Click here for a link to this Sunday's readings:**  
**<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/091425.cfm>**