13/09/2021

# His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America Sunday before the Exaltation of the Holy Cross



My Beloved Christians,

I rejoice to be with you today, fresh from a spiritually enriching visit to our Holy Mother Church in Constantinople, and from the observances of 9/11 at our Saint Nicholas Church and National Shrine at the World Trade Center. I cannot help but note that in the aftermath of every September Eleventh commemoration, we arrive very soon at the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

Today, it so happens that we celebrate the Sunday before the Exaltation, and with a very special Reading from the Holy Gospel. The Lord Jesus compares His Cross to a very unusual incident from the life of Moses, as recorded in the Book of Numbers in the Old Testament. He says:

“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.” [1]

Let us consider, for a moment, what this “serpent in the wilderness” was, and why

the Lord compared Himself to it.

The story concerns the Children of Israel after they were liberated from Egypt, and had passed through the parted waters of the Red Sea. Saint Paul sees in this an image of our own Baptism, for he writes to the Corinthians:

Now, brothers and sisters, I want you to know that our forefathers were all under one cloud, and they all crossed through the sea. And they were all baptized into Moses by the cloud and by the sea. [2]

The miracle of the “cloud and sea” is very much like our Baptism and Chrismation, because we are reborn through water, and infused with the Holy Spirit, who is the “cloud” mentioned in the Scripture.

But even after such a great wonder as the Red Sea parting, the Children of Israel strayed in their hearts from God, as they wandered in the wilderness of the desert of Sinai, on their way to the Promised land. And are we really so different, my friends? Whatever age we receive Baptism and the Grace of the Holy Spirit, we also tend to stray – just like lost sheep.

When the Children of Israel strayed, they were engulfed by snakes and serpents who attacked them, and many died of their wounds. Many more became sick. But the Lord spoke to Moses and said:

“Make a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when they look upon it, shall live.” [3]

Moses obeyed God, and “made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked at the serpent of brass, he lived.” [4]

That was all they had to do. Just look at the Serpent of Brass on the pole, and they would be healed.

My beloved brothers and sisters in Christ:

This is why we raise the Precious Cross on the Feast of its Elevation and at all times with the Cross of Blessing, or even making the sign of the cross on our minds and hearts. Because it is the shining icon of the Cross on which our Lord Jesus Christ gave up His life for the life of the world – for your life, for my life, for every life. Even if our lives are engulfed by evil, the Cross can rescue us. There is no act of hatred, violence, or misery that it cannot overcome. It is the "ὅπλον εἰρήνης, ἀήττητον τρόπαιον – the weapon of peace, the unconquerable trophy." [5]

The Cross is the ultimate act of love, demonstrating God's love for every human being, no matter who they are or what they have done. As the Lord Jesus said:

"Truly, God so loved the world, that He gave His Only-Begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish, but possess eternal life."[6]

Did you hear that, my friends? That we might not perish, but possess eternal life. This is the healing that happens in our lives when we look to the Cross of our Lord, and we understand that we also must bear the infirmities of others with the same love and forgiveness that He has shown to us.

That image of the serpent reminds us that all of our imperfections, sins, and shortcomings were taken by Christ and transfigured on the Cross by love. And it means that we can, by His grace and power, do the same. We can transform the negativity around us through love, through mercy, through forgiveness.

Even on this Twelfth Day of September, just one day after our annual commemoration of 9/11, we can transform the hatred, intolerance, and violence that marked that day, through engaging our faith, by renewing our hope, and by expressing our love.

May we always have this awareness and will to exceed ourselves, and go to His Precious Cross for our own healing, and to demonstrate that love can heal the world.

Amen.

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