



a Kendall Hunt Company

## Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, ABC, Catechist - RCLB Lectionary



### Catechist Background and Preparation

To prepare for this session read all the readings.

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 78:1-2, 34-35, 36-37, 38

Philippians 2:6-11

John 3:13-17

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Is there a particular reading that appeals to you? Is there a word or image that engages you?

Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need.

### The Word in Liturgy

Two historical events in Jerusalem stand in the background of this feast. The first is the dedication of the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre in the fifth century (on September 14). The second is the recovery of the true cross from the Persians in the seventh century. The readings of the day do not dwell on the sufferings of Christ, as one might expect, but, rather, celebrate the cross as a focus of healing and redemption.

The first reading presents a wonder worked by God through the prophet Moses to save the Israelites from illness caused by a plague of serpents. Because their bite caused inflammation, the serpents who attacked the Israelites were called sarap, which means "fiery." Set in a moral context—the people repent of their sin of complaining bitterly (in Hebrew, the expression is: their spirits "loathe" God and Moses)—the miraculous cure through the bronze serpent is shown to be a work of divine mercy. It is God who cures.

The psalm which follows is a historical psalm written in a hymn style. Most of the psalm that is included in today's liturgy pertains to the infidelity of Israel during the forty-year wandering in the wilderness, thus accentuating the background of sin and rebellion that provides the context for our redemption through the cross.

The early Christian hymn proclaimed in today's second reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians contains a beautiful and profound theology of the incarnation, centering on the cross. The *kneosis*, or "self-emptying" of Jesus, is a voluntary and intentional renunciation of divine power and majesty for the sake of identification with human beings. The hymn is perfectly balanced between the downward movement leading to Jesus' death on a cross, and the upward movement of his glorification by God and the whole cosmos. They hymns context



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in the letter makes it clear that the self-emptying of Christ, which leads to the cross—and through the cross to glory—is the paradigm of the Christian life.

Although contemporary Christians tend to refer to the cross and resurrection as separate events, the early Church did not maintain such a rigid distinction, but viewed them as a single mystery to be proclaimed and lived. When today's gospel refers to Jesus being "lifted up," this same rich ambiguity is evident. Jesus is lifted up in his crucifixion. He is also lifted up in the resurrection and ascension which completes the process of his glorification. The monologue of Jesus, of which today's reading is part, begins with a question from Nicodemus concerning Jesus' ascension.

To illustrate God's saving work in Jesus, John makes reference to the incident in Numbers that was the subject of the first reading. Just as looking upon the serpent brought healing to the Israelites, so looking upon Jesus will bring salvation to all who see him "lifted up." The passage closes with an affirmation of the overpowering love of God that grounds the whole mystery of Christ's self-giving, and leads the human person of faith.

### **Catholic Doctrine Redemption**

The crucifixion of Jesus, his humiliation, suffering, and violent death, was not a pointless, tragic end to a good man's life. It is, we believe, the triumph of Jesus' patience, love, and self-offering that follows from his whole life and mission in fulfillment of the old covenant and in accordance with God's plan of salvation (CCC 599). The cross of Jesus is characterized by believers as his exultation, and is the triumph of God's goodness over sin and death whereby our redemption is accomplished. What do we mean by "redemption"?

Redemption is a key concept in theology that explains Jesus Christ's significance for us as humans. It is one of the titles we use for Christ. The Lord is the Redeemer who heals and saves us. In English, the term literally means "a buying back." Theologically, it carries the sense that we who have been "bought back" from sin have been released from that faulted or estranged condition and thus we have been changed from one state to another, that is from bondage to liberation.

To reiterate the first point made about the crucifixion, it is important to note that the fullness of redemption is understood only in the light of Jesus' whole life, his teaching, his public ministry, and the consequences of his mission to proclaim the Good News among us. In other words, the redemption is not just linked to or accomplished by the cross alone, but by the triumph of Jesus' entire earthly life and heavenly exultation.

Catholics believe that the work of the redemption is continued in the experience of the Church at liturgy. Christ, the high priest, who offered himself on our behalf to his heavenly Father, continues the saving work begun in the redemption through the church, his body.

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Thus, we who are incorporated into Christ by the grace of God experience in the liturgy the continuing gift of salvation made possible by Christ's sacrifice (CCC 1069).

Catholics believe that the redemption of Christ affects not only an individual's life (liberation from sin, entrance into the life of grace) but also affects all of human history and creation itself. This was an important theme first developed by St. Irenaeus (d. 200) who took as his starting point Ephesians 1:10 where God is described as having summed up all things (anacephalaiosis) in Christ. The redemption is reuniting what had been scattered in creation and is continuing to realize God's plan of salvation for all of humanity and our history. The image of the eighth day in Catholic teaching emphasizes this summation in Christ's redemption. Seven days is the length of time for the first creation accomplished by God, as described in the Old Testament. But by our new redemption a new day has dawned, the eighth day of the new creation in Christ (CCC349).

The treasure of redemption can be described and savored in so many ways and by so many images because it is central to the significance of Jesus Christ. Thus, we believe that the redemption achieves all that is inauthentic to a true faith. It moves us from the burden of sin and guilt to a divine liberation. Finally, it moves us from a passive acceptance of darkness and death to an active affirmation of risen life in Christ.

