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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Today is a Festival Day on the calendar of the Christian Church around the world. Today is September 14, Holy Cross Day. Holy Cross Day has been celebrated on September 14 since the fourth century AD. In current St. John's practice we only celebrate Festival Days such as Holy Cross Day when they happen to fall on a Sunday. So it has been a few years since we celebrated Holy Cross Day and if you were not in church that day, it may have been a very long time since you celebrated Holy Cross Day.

This past Wednesday in one of our sessions with seventh graders we talked about the fact that this Sunday, September 14, was a festival day in the church. I suggested to them that there were actually three months out of the year in which the 14th was a special day. I asked if they knew the other two, besides September 14. They got Valentine's Day, February 14, right off the bat. But I had to help them with June 14, which is Flag Day in our country. And I suggested that Flag Day is a day to honor the freedom which is ours in our country – freedom that is symbolized by the flag.

September 14, I said, is Holy Cross Day. And I explained that Holy Cross Day is one day of the year set aside in the church to specifically celebrate the salvation that is ours through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That salvation was won on the cross, where Jesus died as payment for the sins of all who would believe in him. And so the cross is another important symbol in our lives which symbolizes freedom from sin, death, and the power of the devil won for us by Jesus.

The First Reading from the Old Testament that is associated with Holy Cross Day is an interesting reading. It describes an event that took place in the history of the Israelites, the Old Testament people of God. The historical context is during the time after the people of God have been freed from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. While it was a great blessing to be freed from the oppressive power of the Pharaoh of Egypt, the new circumstances the people experienced in the years following their emancipation were filled with great challenge.

For having been freed from the land of Egypt, they now had to journey by foot back to their homeland, the land we still know today as Israel. This journey was fraught with difficulty for the people and ultimately an entire generation of people passed away while they struggled to make their way back home. One of the difficulties over these decades of time was the ongoing scarcity of food and water. Although the Lord provided for the people at least with daily bread that was known as manna, yet the people were repeatedly dissatisfied. The difficulties back in Egypt were easy to forget and what the people remembered about slavery in Egypt was that they at least had food to eat and water to drink.

So the First Reading for Holy Cross Day is an account of one of the times when the people of God became impatient on their journey home. And the people spoke out against God and Moses saying, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." The people are bemoaning the lack of water and the lack of variety in their diet as they are dependent upon the manna that comes from the Lord for their bread.

And the Lord is not happy with the people's impatience. And the Lord punishes the people for their impatience. He sends poisonous snakes among the people. And the snakes bit the people. And many of the people died. As a result the people repent. And they call out to Moses to ask the Lord to save them from the snakes. And the Lord responds to the people's cry with loving grace and forgiveness.

But the means whereby the Lord chooses to save the people is interesting. At least at the very first it is not God's response to take away the snakes. Rather, he tells Moses to have a poisonous snake fashioned out of bronze and to set that bronze snake on a pole and to set that pole up in the midst of the people. And the people were instructed that whenever a person was bitten by one of the snakes, they should look upon the bronze serpent on the pole and they would be healed and live.

Centuries later, Jesus reminded the people of this event that was recorded in Holy Scripture. And he used this event to explain what was going to happen at the end of his earthly life. Jesus explained that he himself was going to be lifted up. And what he was looking forward to, of course, was his being lifted up on the cross to die. And furthermore, he explained that after he had been lifted up on the cross to die, everyone who would believe on him would be saved, and have eternal life. And so it was that the earthly life received from

the bronze serpent lifted up on a pole centuries before Jesus, became a foreshadowing, we might say, or a prophecy of sorts, of the eternal life that would come to be known in Jesus and his cross.

On Holy Cross Day we celebrate the grace and salvation that flows from the cross of Jesus. And as we do, we are also aware of at least one very fundamental difference between the serpent on the pole in Moses' time and the cross of the crucifixion in Jesus' time. In the case of the serpent on the pole it was necessary for salvation to be repeated over and over again for those who would be saved from the snake. Who knows how many times even in one day a person had to look to the serpent to be saved yet again.

In the case of the cross of Jesus, the salvation that was accomplished on that cross was a once-in-the-history-of-the-human-race-for-all event. It is not necessary for Jesus to be crucified anew for each and every sinner who would be saved. No, the cross is a reminder of that which has already been accomplished for us now centuries ago on a hill outside of the city of Jerusalem. And we embrace the cross on Holy Cross Day as a symbol of that which has already been accomplished for us, on our behalf.

So the cross for us is much, much more than some kind of glorified good luck charm. We often wear it around our necks, some of us even invisibly inside of our clothing, as a reminder of him to whom we belong. It is a reminder of all that has been accomplished on our behalf upon the cross.

We receive the sign of the cross upon us in our worship as a reminder of the very same thing. Martin Luther himself instructed his followers to continue the practice of the Catholic Church of making the sign of the cross upon themselves, even daily. It was to be, Luther taught, the very first thing that a believer in Christ will do upon rising in the morning. "In the morning," wrote Luther in the introduction to the morning prayer that he wrote for Christians to use as their morning prayer. "In the morning, when you rise, make the sign of the cross and say, "In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen." And Luther's reasoning was that we might remind ourselves - at the beginning of each and every day - of our baptisms, the event through which the cross was first placed upon us. And that - in the same way - we might remind ourselves of the great benefit of our eternal salvation that was accomplished for us on the cross of Jesus Christ. Amen.