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A sculpture representing Moses' staff and the serpent is seen on Mount Nebo Oct. 9, 2017. at sunset in Jordan. Mount Nebo is the place where Moses is said to have seen the Promised Land and died. (CNS/James Ramos, Texas Catholic Herald)



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The feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross combines the paschal triduum and Christmas into one big feast. The scene depicted in Exodus demonstrates why humans need salvation. The hymn Paul wrote to the Philippians tells the story of salvation. Jesus' interaction with Nicodemus reveals the mystery of the human vocation.

Let's begin with Exodus. As Moses leads his people out of slavery, the freedom that once sounded great to enslaved people began to feel too costly. Moving from dependence and a controlled life into the open horizon tested their hope and commitment to the point that they were ready to give it all up. The attacking serpents represented the sacrifice entailed in growth. Only by summoning the courage to face them could they continue on.

Paul's song in Philippians describes Jesus Christ as a revelation of what God is like. While most religions fashion images of God as the all-powerful dominant one to be placated, as the one who dishes out punishment and reward, Jesus reveals a scandalous — some would say blasphemous — image of God in Christ.

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Sept. 14, 2025

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

Jesus' image of God turns human projections of divinity inside out.

Jesus' God is not a show person or super being. The God revealed in Jesus has no need or desire to awe or frighten us into submission. That was the way of the pharaoh. No, God's way is self-emptying. Jesus clung to nothing other than his mutual, self-giving relationship with the Father and his desire to reveal God's loving kindness to the world. That freed him to do anything and everything.

Paul calls Jesus a slave. In the New Testament, that word, *doulos*, depicts someone whose will and abilities are dedicated solely to the service of another. Paul says that Jesus took on the form of a slave. He was not purchased or compelled, rather he chose consciously and purposely to consecrate himself to doing the will of God.

Jesus loved what God loves — all of creation. He was born of a woman, he had to grow and learn and fall and get back up. He used his eyes to see God's creation, his ears to hear people's cries, his heart to know and share God's love, his touch to heal and his will to do everything he could do to help human beings to flourish. The will of Jesus' Father is always that humans fulfill their vocation to live in God.

Jesus experienced the limitations and the potential of creation. He revealed the purpose of life as growth in godliness, seeking God's will, accepting limitation and death in order to open space for God's great and mysterious love and power. That demanded a hope and trust that can only be described as "self-emptying."

John's Gospel depicts Jesus as a self-aware participant in divine life. He could say that no one else could know God's intention like he did. He described himself as sharing in the communion of God's glory, one who had known heaven and chose to reveal heaven to Earth. Comparing himself to the serpent Moses made for his people, Jesus said he would be lifted up in a most frightening way so that all humanity could be saved from every fear that would impede them from loving as freely as he did.

John offers us multiple variations on this theme. Jesus' mission was to "save," to offer us the fullness of life, to be living water, to be the good shepherd, to be the way, the truth and the life. When we celebrate the Triumph of the Holy Cross, we also celebrate the incarnation. Jesus' death was a result of emptying the self to experience creation. His cross was an exaltation in that it revealed the ultimate impotence of death in God’s design.

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The title of this feast, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, expresses the paradox of Christian faith. Christ's death revealed that evil is as dead as its works. As Eastern Catholics sing, "by death, he conquered death." Christ's death and resurrection assure us that death and evil will never have the last word, that God's

love is everlasting and therefore, what God loves is everlasting.

Believing in Christ means that we choose to orient our lives by faith in the God of life. It means that we bet our lives on God's undying love. It means that, like Jesus, although we may know unspeakable pain or sorrow, we have nothing to fear. It means that, as we pray in Psalm 1, evil is ultimately nothing more than "chaff driven by the wind."

Today's feast, encapsulating the entire mystery of salvation, urges us to have the courage to live in the divine paradox. It assures us that Christ has shown the way.

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