Even though we don’t want to admit it, fall and winter are right around the corner. One of the many benefits of cold nights is the clarity of the sky. I love going out and looking into the clear night sky and seeing the “billions and billions of stars”, as Carl Sagan used to say, that are visible. In fact, I love to stare at a black area of the sky until stars begin to appear out of seemingly nowhere as their light collects in the eye. Doing this creates a sense of awe in me at the vastness and enormity of the created universe. But it also highlights a fundamental astronomical paradox: Looking at the stars in the present allows us to see into the past. As we stand outside in the present and look at the stars we realize that the stars that are right in front of our eyes do not represent the current state of those stars. Rather the light from some of those stars left it thousands, millions or even billions of years ago. In fact the stars we see may not even exist anymore, yet there they are. It is a paradox. As Webster’s puts it, a paradox is a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true. In other words, something made up of two opposite entities (in this case the past and the present) that seem impossible to exist together but that are in fact actually possible and true.

God’s design and the story of our salvation from creation to the present are, in many ways, a collection of paradoxes, for example: God existing before existence and then creating everything out of nothing; entering into new and eternal life through death; the greatest of all
is the servant of all; that God become man and was born of a virgin. Today we gather to celebrate the Feast of the Exultation of the Holy Cross. A day when we celebrate one of the most mysterious and important paradoxes in history: that the horrific instrument of Christ’s crucifixion is the actually the instrument of our salvation. It is an important part of our identity and in fact a symbol of our victory. All part of God’s design. We see this in our readings today.

In the first reading the Israelites had grown weary from their wandering in the desert and were fed up with what God had provided for them and so they “complained against God and Moses”. As punishment for their lack of faith and trust, God sent poisonous and deadly serpents into their midst and many of the Israelites died as a result. BUT God also gave them a means to overcome them, an antidote if you will. What is significant here is that God provides a means of salvation in the midst of death. One only needs to look at the Serpent on the pole to be healed and saved from death but this involves trust and putting their faith back in God; it takes humility and contrition; it takes action.

The serpent on the pole raised in the desert prefigures the raising of Christ on the Cross which in a similar way is given to us an antidote for the ravages of sin in the world. “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” as we hear in the Gospel today. This is accomplished through Jesus’ death and resurrection. By rising from the dead Christ defeated the death that his Cross was actually supposed to bring about. Though Jesus was tortured and hung to die on the Cross, his resurrection MADE the Cross THE instrument by which divine justice was served and our sins expiated. Therefore death, which was brought about by the sin of Adam and Eve via a tree, was overcome by the wood of another tree making the Cross, paradoxically, a symbol of victory, not defeat.
It is precisely this victory, won on behalf of the entire human race, that has made the Cross such a powerful image of those who follow Christ; it part of our identity as Christians. More importantly though, the Cross represents the manner with which we follow Christ. By facing the challenges of life with the same love and determination that motivated Jesus to pick up and endure hardship, pain, humiliation and death that the cross inflicted, we actively unite ourselves to his sacrifice in order share in his victory. We call it “picking up our Crosses” and although the particulars of carrying our crosses are difficult and often painful they are the means in which we also share in Christ’s victory. This is another one of God’s seemingly infinite number of paradoxes but one that is a gift to us.

The Holy Cross itself is a gift to us and this gift is beautifully represented on the mural behind me. God’s hands are extended from heaven: are they giving or receiving the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross? The answer is, both. The Father gives us the means of salvation through his Son, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” as we hear in the famous John 3:16 verse today. But then it continues, “...that the world might be saved through him.” Jesus in turn gives back to the Father all who are separated from the Father by sin through his acceptance of the Cross. Giving and receiving both by means of the Holy Cross.

And so, today we take a step back and contemplate the mystery and paradox that is the Holy Cross. We see the Cross all over the place and make the sign of the Cross so often in course of our days and weeks; do we take the time to really appreciate why it is so important? Like the stars in the night sky, maybe the best way to appreciate its paradox and the immensity of its meaning is to stop and take a look. Even then, like staring at a black patch of the night sky as I mentioned before, sometimes we may need to stare at the Holy Cross and contemplate it for a while until enough of the light of its meaning collects in our minds eye.