

John 3:1-17
2nd Sunday in Lent
“The Cross is...”

March 8, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

INI

Nicodemus was a ruler of the Pharisees. He was a man with deep understanding of the legal code of Israel, of the history of God’s chosen people, as well as of prophecy. He had seen and heard of the signs of Jesus and was intrigued. He thought this man actually could be the Messiah, but wasn’t quite sure yet. He could just be a prophet. But even a prophet from God would be speaking God’s words. This man actually could know the key to salvation. So, he comes to Jesus inviting Jesus into a conversation. **“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”**

These sound like nice, flattering words. But Jesus, hearing the gears grinding in Nicodemus’ head, and understanding the unspoken question on Nicodemus’ heart, and knowing that the conversation could go rapidly south with even the most honorable of the Pharisees, quickly redirects the conversation. **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** Jesus isn’t wasting any time with words of flattery. And He isn’t going to waste any time with any kind of legalistic understanding of salvation. So Jesus quickly points to God’s activity in salvation. One must *be born* again.

Nicodemus wasn’t getting it. He still has a Pharisaical mindset. The question that was on his heart had the wrong focus. It was the same question that many asked before—“What must *I* do to be saved?” And it shows in his response. Essentially, it’s this. *I can’t enter the womb a second time! What are you talking about Jesus?*

Nicodemus was right. Even if *he could* figure out a way to enter into the womb again, it still wouldn’t help him. “And why is that?” you may be thinking. Well, how many of you mothers in here were in labor for 4 hours? 8? 12? maybe even 24 hours or more? And how many of you, for however long it took, laid back, got a nice, soothing, back or shoulder massage, and maybe read your favorite book while you let your baby do all the work of being born?

Being born is a passive activity. The mother *gives birth*. A baby *is born*. Jesus doubles down with His saying, this time talking about the Holy Spirit’s activity. And the word for Spirit is the same word that is used for wind or breath. So Jesus plays with this a bit. **“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”** With these words Jesus is pointing to the sole activity of God in a person’s salvation. Nothing that Nicodemus or any of us can do can save. Just like the wind, we can see the Spirit’s activity, but we can’t control Him. We can’t make Him do anything.

What Jesus is talking about can be a difficult topic for even us to fully wrap our heads around. And we understand that salvation is by God’s grace. For a man like Nicodemus, a man schooled in the thought that we have to do something to earn salvation, it made no sense. So, Jesus invites Nicodemus to go on a bit of a mental field trip, a stroll down memory lane. That short, seemingly obscure reference in verses 14-15 is a throwback to an event in the life of God’s people, the Israelites, as they journeyed in the wilderness after having been freed from slavery in Egypt. Understanding that story will enrich Nicodemus’ understanding and our understanding of who Jesus is and what He came to do for us.

“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”

Throughout the Israelites’ journey in the wilderness God took care of them. He gave them bread from heaven and water to drink. God graciously provided for their every need, yet they turned against Him in the desire for something more than what they had: **“And the people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?’**

For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Numbers 21:5 Oh, there was food and water. God made sure of that. This complaint exposed their selfish discontentment with what they had been given. They were ungrateful, forgetting that they had been rescued from slavery. These gracious provisions weren’t enough; they wanted something more.

So, God gave them something more: fiery serpents as a judgment against their rebellion. These serpents bit the people and many died. It was because of these serpents that the Israelites realized that they had sinned against God. Seeing that they had messed up, they asked Moses to pray for them, that God might take away the snakes. Moses did as the people asked and God had mercy on them. He commanded Moses to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole so that everyone who was bitten could look at it and live.

Scientifically speaking, that doesn’t even make sense. Looking at a bronze serpent on a pole cannot remove deadly venom coursing through your veins. But it can if God says it can. God spoke. He attached His promise to that bronze serpent and the Israelites looked to it in faith—believing that God would save them through the way He provided.

So going back to John 3:14-15: **“And 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.”**

Jesus came to this world because deadly venom courses through our veins too. It’s called sin. Adam and Eve, our first parents, were “snake-bitten.” Like the Israelites in the wilderness, God graciously provided for their every need, yet they turned against Him in the desire for something more than what they had. The ancient serpent, Satan, tempted them and they gave in, bringing sin into their lives and into creation itself. The venom of sin has passed from generation to generation. You and I have it. Our kids have it. It’s why you’ll never have to teach your children how to be bad. It’s why our hearts are filled with so much hatred, violence, abuse, racism, pride, selfishness, jealousy, adultery—it’s why we journey through the wilderness of this life often craving something more than what God has graciously provided. We have a sin problem. We’ve inherited it and we commit it. This venom is deadly and it is killing us.

But God has mercy on us. Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned, God promised a Savior who would crush the head of the serpent, undoing the deadly consequences of sin, while He himself would be bitten.

This Savior, Jesus, the Son of God, was lifted up to death on the pole of the cross. When Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, he lifted up that which was killing the people. God, in effect, was declaring, “Look! That which is killing you is now hanging on a pole! I have put away the snake and its venom. I have put away your sin. Look to this serpent in faith and live!”

The cross is our bronze serpent on a pole—Jesus became that which was killing us! St. Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 5:21: **“For our sake he made him (that is, Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** Jesus became our sin on the cross—the sin we’ve inherited, the sins we have committed, and the sins we will commit—all of it hung on the pole of the cross in the person of Jesus.

Eventually, Nicodemus came around. Eventually he understood. As a later follower of Jesus, he would join Joseph of Arimathea in preparing the body of his crucified Lord. He came to understand that he could do nothing for his salvation, but that God was doing everything for him. Today as we ponder the cross, we also remember that our Lord has done all the work for us. He hung on the pole of the cross putting to death our death. And by His work, all the work of our salvation is finished. And He continues to bring that saving work to us through His sacraments.

That saving power of the bronze serpent on the pole was all God’s work. And God’s work worked because He said it would. The same is true of God’s work in the NT. The cross, baptismal waters, the Lord’s supper, they all also get their power from the promise of God attached to them. And Jesus’ work on the pole of the cross proves it. And now God is declaring to us, “Look! The sin that is killing you was hung on the pole of the cross! God has put away your sin. Look to Jesus in faith and live!” Amen.