

So the Son of Man Must be Lifted Up

Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:9-16

For me, it was a perfect week to handle the words Jesus spoke that so confused old man Nicodemus, late one night in his doorway. Because I have been behind the curve on the coronavirus all week. Every new day, new, larger, broader measures went into place, and everybody's circumstances changed, sometimes by the hour. So, as I re-read Nicodemus words to Jesus, "*How can these things be?*" I felt a sympathy for the old man that I hadn't felt in four decades of reading this passage.

Here was an old established rabbi, at the top of his game, all his ducks finally in a row, having to slink into Jesus' doorway, because he knew this young woodworker from nowhere had something, knew something that Nicodemus and all his brilliant and accomplished friends had missed. The old rabbi was respectful enough in the doorway, but Jesus moved ahead at a pace that wouldn't let the old man get his breath. Ten seconds after hello, Jesus was into solemn testimony.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God." "Born?" Nicodemus said in so many words, "I'm a little old for that!" Nicodemus knew what Jesus was getting at, and the old man had been through enough to understand what starting over would mean to a man like him so tangled in the affairs of old Israel. "...*born of water and Spirit?*" the old man probably thought to himself, "You mean you want me to go to the Jordan and announce I'm a sinner to the guy in wearing camel hair? Oh yeah, that'll work well. Young Camel Hair will sort me out and I'll spend the rest of the year answering uncomfortable questions in the Sanhedrin.

"Don't marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'" Jesus kept racing ahead of the old man. "The wind blows where it will and you hear the sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it's going. So it is" Jesus said, "with everyone who is born of the Spirit." At this point, Nicodemus has to admit he's been lapped and he's no longer in the race. "*How can these things be?*" the old man exclaims to Jesus. But Jesus continues to work him over!

"You're a teacher of Israel and you don't understand these things?" Once again, Jesus lapses into solemn testimony, courtroom language. "*Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you people don't receive our testimony. If I've told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things."*

By now, Jesus knows he's confounded Nicodemus, but he goes on and talks about heavenly things anyway! *"No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man!"* Now, here Jesus is talking about something Nicodemus knows! Some 500 years before, the prophet Daniel had seen visions in a Babylonian palace of one pagan despot after the other, a parade of tyrants, lions and tigers and bears, oh my! And then, in Daniel's vision, came Judgment Day, and the courtroom of heaven descended from the clouds, the Almighty on a flaming throne, angels all around.

But nothing could happen, judgment only just began, because everyone in court, the despot defendants, the angels, the Almighty on the throne were staring up into heaven, into *"the clouds"* waiting for, Daniel said, *"...one like a son of man..."*. The point being that from the very beginning God promised Adam and Eve that one of their offspring, a man would put to rest all the anguish and upset and violence caused by the Fall.

So what Jesus is saying, nose to nose with Nicodemus in the darkened doorway is, "You're looking at him! I'm the Son of Man!" And Nicodemus didn't get it because, as Jesus said, *"...unless a man is born from above, he can't see the kingdom of God."* And from here Jesus spins into a story that Nicodemus knows like the back of his hand. Jesus says, *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."* And it's here that Nicodemus in the doorway can look Jesus in the eye and say, "At last! Something I can understand! I know all about the Serpent in the Wilderness. Nicdemus would get it, because it's an old man story!"

The story is from chapter 21 in the book of Numbers, where Moses was near the end of his life and the end of his rope. Just weeks before, Israel had rounded the bend and camped just south, southeast of the Promised Land. But as God's people were staging for the last push toward the Jordan, Moses' older sister Miriam just got too old and she died in the camp just weeks away from her life's dream. And about when Moses got the news, the Israelites had one of their recurring water panics.

The wells were dry and Moses was slow. So they found him grieving in his tent and hounded him to make a move. So Moses and Aaron don't get to grieve their sister, they had to punch in and pray that God would provide water for his thirsty people again. And God told Moses to grab his staff and bring the people to a great rock nearby and to just *"tell the rock to yield its water."* And Moses did what a prophet must never do.

He blew up, screamed at the people, some crazy talk about him and Aaron giving people water and then he beat the rock with his staff, and then likely folded into the sand and wept for his sister. It was understandable, but still wrong. Human, but still sinful. God gave the people water anyway. That was a mercy. And God told Moses and Aaron that they had just lost their ticket to

the Promised Land. They would not live to see the people they had led all these years cross the Jordan. That was severe.

It is no easy business to speak God's Word and handle sacred things. Jesus said in Luke 12, "*To whom much is given, much will be required*" And Moses learned that lesson 1400 years before Jesus ever taught it. So Moses had his pink slip, but he wasn't done. An Edomite army took the field between Israel and the Jordan, so it fell to Moses to lead God's people back the way they came looking for another highway that would bypass their enemies and get them safely home.

More time in the desert than anyone was ready to bear. During that delay, Aaron aged out. So God called Moses and Aaron and Aaron's son Eleazar up a mountain, where Eleazar got the high priest's robes and Aaron lay down, just in his tunic and died, leaving his son the priest and his brother Moses to bury him atop the mountain. After that, it was back to the desert for Moses to continue to lead God's people in the wrong direction looking for another highway. And it was here that the people broke.

Getting that close to the Promised Land and having to turn their backs and find another way, the Israelites boiled over and began to chant and shout against God and Moses. Forty years after leaving Egypt, they were shouting and chanting about no water and dull food and wanting to go back to Egypt and resume being slaves near the Nile. By this point, Moses was beyond fighting them. But God had heard enough and sent them a swarm of snakes who filled their camp and began striking people.

The people were both terrified and bitterly sorry for turning on God and Moses, so they came to his tent and begged Moses to pray about the snakes as he always had about the water. For the first time, Moses headed out to pray without his brother at his side. As always, God listened to Moses when he prayed for Israel. so God told Moses to arrange for the forging of a bronze serpent to be nailed to a cross beam and held up in the middle of the camp as a place where people dying of snakebite could be healed.

There was a lot of irony in the punishment God chose and the salvation he arranged that day. The people had been crying out for Egypt, anywhere but another mile in this hot, dry desert where God had made them wander since most of them were children. But Egypt was a snaky kind of place. The Pharaoh wore a crown with a cobra that rose out of his forehead. So in a strange sense, God was giving the Israelites what they were crying for, a camp full of snakes like they used to have in Egypt.

Because the Egyptians were Serpent worshipers, they had thrown in with the snake from the Garden, and they had acted hatefully toward God's people during the years when the Israelites lived there. It is a strange feature of human nature that desperation can drive us toward the very things that brought us low in the first place. Israel wanted the Serpent, so it was snakes they got.

And the solution for their problem also involved a Serpent. God had Moses make a bronze Serpent to nail onto a cross beam of wood and post in the center of the camp. And any snakebitten soul who laid eyes on the crucified Serpent was instantly healed from the venom in the snakebite. The point being for God's people to understand that the way of the Serpent leads to judgment and death. The path back to Egypt is a path that ends in slavery and death. To find life, to get healed, involves God's people seeing the Serpent for what he is and having done with the Serpent and all his works.

So in Moses day, the sight of a Serpent nailed to a cross saved God's people for that last detour before they could cross the Jordan and make their way home. But why does Jesus remember the story in a dark doorway some 1400 years later? I think he was answering Nicodemus' question, "How can a man be born when he's old? ... How can these things be?" The truth is you can be in the desert a long time. You can get pretty close to the Promised Land and still run short on hope and lose your bearings.

And what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and to us is that he would bear on the cross the condemnation we deserve for learning so much and getting so far and still losing our way. Like Israel in the last months before entering the Promised Land, we can get snakebitten if our hearts get focused on what's not there and what's gone wrong. And sight of Jesus on a cross is meant to remind us, first, that losing hope and turning on God is a path that only leads to death. And second, that Jesus has been there.

He took what the Serpent deserved so that we could find forgiveness and healing and help at any stage in life. We never get so old, we never run so wrong that we can't look to the Cross and find forgiveness and healing and help, a new start with God's Spirit in play. We can always afford to go to the Jordan and announce to God's people what sinners we've been and what mercy we need.

The sight of Jesus on the Cross was meant to teach us two things. First, the Father's undying hatred for the Serpent's lies and the way of life that grows from them. Despair and rebellion against God and the commandments always, ever leads to death. And second, the Father's unbounded, inexhaustible love for anyone who will look to Jesus and trust him to bear our guilt and then start over, born again, born from above, trusting in the love of the Father and the power of the Spirit.

Jesus put it this way, he said, "...so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For in this way God loves the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." "How can these things be?" Nicodemus had asked. How can old men start over, how can God's Spirit change everything when so much water has gone over the dam? And the answer is, "By the Cross."

A single, faithful glimpse of Jesus, lifted up for our sins, entitles us to a whole new start in life. No matter how bad it's gotten, no matter how wrong we are, the love of God and the power of his Spirit come into play, anytime and every time we look to Christ, willing to start over, depending on him. That's how God loves us, by showing us his Son on a cross in our place.