

SERMON: The Serpent and the Son of Man

TEXT: John 3:1-17

I can't believe I used an illustration about a snake last week in my sermon, and this week there's a serpent in the title of my sermon! Just to be clear, I don't like snakes or serpents. I don't like looking at them. I don't even like talking about them. But here we are.

I think most of us understand that throughout the Bible, the serpent is a symbol of evil. From the beginning of time, according to Biblical history, it was the serpent doing the work of Satan by tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Time and again, the serpent is described as poisonous, deadly, subtle, malicious, a sharp-tongued enemy with a burning bite. So you may be surprised to hear, as we read in the Gospel of John, that Jesus compared himself to a serpent of the Old Testament.

But before we get to that part, let's start at the beginning of the passage, when Nicodemus goes to visit Jesus.

I have to wonder if Nicodemus regretted his visit to Jesus that night. I mean, with one statement regarding the signs of Jesus and the presence of God, he gets a full lecture, leaving him with more questions than answers. I'd be willing to bet he didn't get a moment of sleep after that encounter.

First, there's the question of what it means to be born from above. Nicodemus takes these words literally, "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" The answer Jesus gives indicates that he is speaking metaphorically. However, then poor *Nick* is left with the question of what it means to be born "of water and spirit." We who are churchgoers might understand that Jesus is speaking of baptism, but then Jesus goes on to complicate the matter further: "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."

But he doesn't expand on that idea either. He goes on to talk about wind. "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Surprisingly, Nicodemus is still able to form a complete sentence, asking "How can these things be?" Then, Jesus proceeds to insult him by pointing out his

ignorance and his arrogance. "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

Next, Jesus moves to something that Nicodemus should certainly know about. "And just 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."

*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.* Unless you're extremely well-educated or uncommonly familiar with the Old Testament scriptures, I'm guessing you don't understand this reference. I didn't - even after graduating from seminary!

So, let's learn something new today. From the book of Numbers, Chapter 21, beginning with verse 4, we read the story of "the bronze serpent." The Israelites have escaped Egypt, and they are wandering in the wilderness. "...But the

people became impatient on the way. 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 detest this miserable food* (that is, the manna that God provided). Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, *We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.*”

After praying for the people as they requested, Moses was instructed by the Lord to “*make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.* So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.”

I know. Weird story, right? But here’s what I take from it.

This world we live in is a wilderness. There is beauty, to be sure. But it is also wild. Untamed. Challenging. And dangerous. It is full of poisonous serpents -

both reptile and human. Chances are good that we will be bitten here and there in our lifetime. This is not paradise.

Like the Israelites, we complain. A lot. “God, fix this. God, fix that. God, why do you let bad things happen to us?”

As Jesus explained to Nicodemus, “What is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Clearly, the wilderness is flesh, if you will. Serpents are born of the flesh. But those who believe in heavenly things, in the kingdom of God, are born of the Spirit. Those who look to the crucified and risen Jesus as Lord will be given eternal life. While on earth, in the wilderness, we are still subject to the pain and suffering of the flesh, but our spirits will live eternally.

There is a beautiful Dominican retreat center in Wisconsin, right across the Mississippi River from Dubuque, Iowa, which I enjoyed for my own retreats when I lived in Iowa. I especially appreciated the beauty of the land around the center, and I enjoyed exploring the grounds. On one visit, I happened upon a cemetery where many of the nuns are buried. I walked through, reading the gravestones, and noticed something very unusual. Instead of two dates - a date of birth and a date of

death - there was only one date engraved below the name of the sister buried there. Paying closer attention, I realized it was the date of death.

It was very curious and rather disturbing, and I spent hours pondering what it might mean. It never occurred to me to do any research or to ask someone; I think I was just waiting on the Holy Spirit. What finally came to me was that the date of a believer's death is the same day that they are born into eternal life. And to a person who has given her whole life in service to God, it's the only date that finally matters.

It makes a lot of sense. Our birth date is when we are born of the flesh. And while there are traditions that put a heavy emphasis on the day that you were "born again" or born of the Spirit, there are many believers who simply cannot pinpoint that specific day or moment. Many who were baptized as infants and raised in faith often profess a lifelong faith or describe a journey of conversion. So, perhaps none of us are fully born of the Spirit until we die and are raised into eternal life and become one with our Maker.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

May we believe it and live it... to the glory of God!

AMEN.