

Look and Live

Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:(1-13)14-21

Fourth Sunday in Lent/10th March 2024

Earlier in John 3, Nicodemus arrives in the dark seeking light. He arrives at night, afraid of what others might think if seen during the day. He comes searching for insight, for wisdom, for answers. He's heard rumors about what this man can do: signs and wonders, imbuing the presence of God.

Nicodemus is not new to the world of the spirit, to the religious life. He's well-educated. Raised in the faith, he rose through the ranks and now sits as a religious leader among the people. He's a powerful man, a man of influence, one with authority. All of which makes his appearance—at *night*—even more mysterious.

And Jesus knows why. Jesus knows his heart. Jesus knows his thoughts. Jesus knows the stirrings of his soul. Jesus knows that he is seeking something. He's a religious professional, knows the stories of his people, grew up in the community, and went to Sabbath school, but it wasn't enough. He was religious by nature and by practice. He worshipped Yahweh on the Sabbath, observed Torah, and ensured others did the same. But then he goes to Jesus with a seeker's heart, a spirit of curiosity, and the hunger for something else, undercover at night so no one would see.

Here's the truth, Nicodemus. I'm going to level with you and cut to the chase. I know you're looking for the kingdom of God. I know you're searching for a world shaped by God's justice and righteousness. I know you're looking for something more, a better world, a deep connection to your soul. I know your faith and your religious practices are growing stale and tired. I know they don't speak to you anymore. Here's the truth, Nicodemus: no one can see the kingdom of God without being re-educated, re-newed, re-born.

“Reborn.” “Born-again.” “Born from above.” Whatever way you want to say it—and these are all correct—the point is you have to start again. You have to go back to school. You have to unlearn some things to learn new things, kingdom things, about God, yourself, and the world. This way of God does not come naturally. You don't reach the kingdom through a developmental process or evolution. All the human wisdom and reason in the world won't lead you to that place. All the religious wisdom of the world can't lead you to that place – it might even stand in the way.

“How can this be?” Nicodemus said. “I don't understand.”

Being a literalist, he misses the point—as literalists often do, trying to be, well, *literal*, choking out the truth with the facts. “How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

To which Jesus says, a *second* time, *Here's the truth, Nicodemus. Listen to me. You won't find what you're looking for if you don't open your eyes to what you cannot see. You can't enter the kingdom, you won't see the life as I see it, live in it the way I live in it, love it the way I love it and suffer for it, without becoming a child of the Spirit who wants to birth something new in you. If you want to live in the natural world, be a materialist, and focus on only the things you see—the flesh—that's what you'll get. If you want to see what you cannot see, if you want to live in the*

world of God's Spirit and be a part of something infinite and wondrous and holy, then you need help, you need the Spirit.

Stunned. Shocked. Picking his jaw up from the floor, Nicodemus tries to collect himself. Jesus knows what he's doing. Jesus knows he is, in love, dismantling the foundations of Nick's life and world. Jesus is intentionally *throwing* him into deep existential conflict—because that is how we learn and come to life.¹ Jesus doesn't let up but drives the point home, drives him deeper into himself. “Do not be astonished, Nicodemus, that I said, ‘You must be born from above.’ 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. That's what it's like for everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:7-8)—open to something wild and wondrous and entirely beyond your control.

“But how can these things be?” Nic objects. “You say you're a teacher, and yet you do not understand these things?”

And for a *third* time, Jesus pulls out the “verily.” “Verily, I say to you” (Jn. 3:11). *Here's the God's honest truth, Nicodemus. Listen to me. How can you 'get it' if you're not open to what I have to say? If I have to explain to you how the wind works, how will you understand how the Spirit works? I have come to bring to you the way of the Spirit, the way of heaven, the way of God's kingdom. I have been sent to show you, to teach you, to love you into the kingdom.*

And in order to see it, Jesus says to Nicodemus, *You have to look at me. Keep your eyes fixed on me.* “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 the life of God. 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 the life of God. 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” (John 3:14-17).

And then Nicodemus's voice goes silent. Does he leave Jesus at night, or do they wrestle with the truth until the dawn? The text doesn't say. The next time Nicodemus shows up in John's Gospel is on the Friday of Jesus' crucifixion. John tells us, “Nicodemus, *who had at first come to Jesus by night*, also came,”—now in full light for all to see—“bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths...” (John 19:39, 40). By this time, Nicodemus is a follower and a believer, open to the movement of the Spirit, a witness to the crucifixion, who saw the Son of Man lifted up on a cross. With eyes transfixed upon him, high and lifted up, Nicodemus saw the love of God descending through him and through him to a world, not to condemn, but to save, to redeem. For here's the point: to see what's happening through this man lifted up on a tree, on a cross, to “see” what's really going on *in* him, what God is doing through him, is to be born from above and so born again, reborn, re-educated by the Spirit, transformed.

John wants us to keep our eyes fixed on him. His favorite word for this is “believe.” It's all over chapter 3. It's all over John's Gospel. By “believe,” John means something other than “faith.” That's almost too passive for him. “To believe” doesn't mean to have “beliefs” about Jesus, about God, about the Spirit, about the cross. Beliefs are helpful, up to a point. Nicodemus had beliefs, too, but they got in the way. John understands belief more as trust; it's relational. *John calls us toward active participation in the one upon whom we transfix our eyes.* To believe involves *active looking* so that in time, the scales fall from our eyes and we truly see that in the

lifting up of this man, a very good man, upon a cross, that he didn't deserve but willingly chose to embrace to make a point (see John 10:17-18), is none other than the very source of life, the messenger of God, God's Word in the flesh (John 1:1-5), who wants us to see and know and feel and claim for ourselves that "God so loved" in him.

That's why Jesus is always trying to pull us out of our comfort zones, our closed-off silos, our limited orbits of knowledge, and our assumptions; he's always drawing us out from our self-absorbed, self-centered preoccupations, drawing us away from distortion and darkness into the truth and light, so that we open our eyes and see. Jesus illustrates this point with his mysterious allusion to Numbers 21, an odd story from when the Israelites were in the wilderness and getting attacked by poisonous snakes. God told Moses to create a bronze serpent and place it at the top of a long pole. Every time a snake bit someone, they were to look up at the serpent on the pole—to look upon it and live. Here, in John 3, the parallel is clear. The serpent lifted up becomes a symbol of what Jesus will experience, lifted up on a cross. There's something about the lifting up that saves. The serpent is lifted up to save an entire race of people. The Son is lifted up for the world.

There's a difference, though, between these two stories. In Numbers, the serpents were the source of pain and suffering, but not in John 3.² The story in Numbers reflects our general attitude toward those slithering beasts. We associate the snake with the devil, with the tempter in the Garden of Eden, the cursed animal without legs. We flinch and maybe run in terror when we think of snakes or see one slinking through the garden. We tend to have a natural disposition to hate or distrust snakes.

In John, however, Jesus is compared to a serpent lifted up by Moses. It doesn't say Jesus *is* a serpent, but there's some comparison going on. In the long history of biblical interpretation, many have missed the connection due to our negative associations with the serpent as evil and menacing.³ Because of these associations, the comparison with Jesus is often lost. But strange and disturbing as it might seem to us today, in Jesus' time, throughout the Mediterranean, the snake or serpent was not feared but a symbol of renewal, transformation, and even resurrection. Snakes adorn many of the frescoes in the ruins of Pompeii. The snake was worshipped in the temples of Apollo, Athena, and Asclepius—the Greek god of healing and medicine. The temples to Asclepius, like the large one in Pergamum (Turkey), were often spa-like, with therapeutic water pools and even mental health facilities, which included dream interpretation. Snakes (non-poisonous) were used in the therapeutic and healing process. The rod of Asclepius—a single pole with one snake wrapped around it—can still be found in the symbol of more than 60% of all medical organizations, including the American Medical Association. Other organizations use the symbol of the Caduceus, two intertwined snakes with wings, which is associated with Hermes or Mercury, not Asclepius. Jesus and John, as well as John's community, would have been familiar with the meaning of these symbols. Here, Jesus is *like*—not *is*—a snake, lifted up, who brings life—renewal, eternal life, God's life.

Throughout John 3, the focus is on renewal, transformation, and what it takes to experience being born again or from above. It's about life, new life, God's life. The focus is on Jesus himself. John wants us to look at him, lifted up—to even see the act of lifting up connected with the meaning of 3:16 and 17.⁴

For John, Jesus' crucifixion is also his exaltation. He wants all eyes on him, to believe in or trust in him. For the more Jesus is lifted up, the more people will be drawn to him. Indeed, we find Jesus saying later in John's gospel, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). Here, the lifting up includes the crucifixion and then the lifting up from the earth, the resurrection. They are all a piece for John.

Jesus' crucifixion is not a failure and defeat for John but just one more expression of the extent to which Jesus will go to demonstrate the limitless reach of God's love for the world, a world often at odds with God. The only way we will "see" this, understand it, is to stand under it and look up, believing, that is, trusting in him—again and again, by being born—again and again and again by the Spirit.

This is the gospel: to see what's happening through this man lifted up on a tree, on a cross, to "see" what's going on in him—"God so loved," in him—*this* is to be born from above and so born again, reborn, re-educated by the Spirit, transformed. Look and live.

¹ See the work of James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 2nd edition, (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989), who identifies conflictual experiences as integral if not essential to the process of transformation and growth.

² The most exhaustive study on the symbol of the snake in the Bible and in antiquity is James H. Charlesworth, *The Good and Evil Serpent: How Universal Symbol Became Christianized* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). See his thorough analysis, "The Symbolism of the Serpent in the Gospel of John," pp. 352-314.

³ Charlesworth's claim, 362ff. "The possibility that the Fourth Evangelist is drawing some analogy between the serpent and Jesus is unthinkable if the serpent symbolizes evil." (362). However, Charlesworth has shown that ophidian symbolism within John does not contain this understanding.

⁴ Cf. the quote from worship bulletin: "While the world was looking on, the serpent should be slain on high upon the Cross, herein is the marvel." Archbishop of Constantinople (c. 349-407), *Homilies on Colossians*, quoted in Charlesworth, 402.