

# “Nicodemus (Part 2)”

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John 3:1-17

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the [Judeans]. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘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. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him,*

*“How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the 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. 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. “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 the words of my mouth  
And the meditations of all of our hearts  
Be acceptable in thy sight  
O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.  
Amen

Last week we explored through Nicodemus—who came to Jesus at night—in the dark—which is how John indicates that he is SPIRITUALLY blind—the question of whether or not it is possible to have OUR hearts and minds opened that WE might see clearly—that we might be enlightened.

The answer, of course, was yes.

This week our question is what has to HAPPEN in order for our hearts and minds to be opened that we might see—and have eternal life—life abundant.

Jesus doesn't mince any words. Snakes! We have to see snakes! "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," Jesus says, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Well, that clears that up, right?

But here's the thing, I don't know about you, but I don't like snakes. I'm afraid of snakes—and I'd just as soon not look at snakes, thank you very much. My first response, after, of course, saying to myself, why is Jesus even talking about snakes?—is that if there is any actual snake viewing involved in enlightenment, I'm going to have to rethink this whole thing. Snakes!

All kidding aside, Jesus' reference to snakes is an allusion to the Hebrew Scripture lesson we heard this morning. The forty days of Lent, excluding Sundays, echoes the forty years the children of Israel had to wander in the desert before they were ready to enter into the Promised Land—and that's AFTER God had freed them from slavery in Egypt—AFTER God had destroyed Pharaoh's army—and AFTER having given them the Law on Mount Sinai. Even after all that, even after receiving everything necessary for their freedom—the children of Israel had some work to do themselves before they could truly leave behind their internalized slavery. They had to see the snakes within.

Consider: As we saw last week, and as we see in the verses immediately following our Gospel lesson for today, although Jesus didn't come to condemn the world, those who cannot trust in God's love—condemn THEMSELVES to a life of fear and hiding—a life of rage and exclusion. Behind this inability to trust, John tells us, is a primal fear of punishment, judgment—a primal fear that we can't trust anything good that might happen to us—because in the end, we truly only merit being punished. We're always waiting for the next shoe to drop.

In the first epistle of John we read: "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

And to be clear—the one who fears punishment on an existential, primal level—will inevitably project that punishment on those around them—or if, perhaps, the leader of the free world, on the entire world, itself. Bombs must fall. The weak and vulnerable must be made to pay. What is the need to dominate, other than a ever-present fear of being dominated?—other than always experiencing the needs of others as a threat to oneself? Cruelty is the point. "...but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment. And whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

Indeed.

Whatever else seeing snakes means, it means having the courage to be perfected in love—healed in love—rather than hiding from our own faults, projecting them on others, in fear of punishment—in fear of judgment.

We are told in our passage from Numbers that after they have spoken against God and Moses, after having become discouraged, after assuming that God has freed them from slavery only to let them die in the desert—crying out, in a classic Yogi Berra-ism, "There is no food—and it tastes horrible"—AFTER all this—revealing their lack of trust in God's providence—revealing their deep expectation of being abandoned—God sent poisonous snakes into the midst of the people.

We should note, however, that we are NOT told that God sent these snakes as a punishment. "Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died." In fact, the word translated here as "poisonous," can also mean "fiery." It is actually a form of the same word

for the heavenly creatures who worship and serve God in the heavenly temple, namely, seraphim.

The point to be made is that these snakes are not agents of punishment, so much as servants of the Lord. They serve to make visible to the children of God the inner reality of their own fear. In their fear, the people have made of their communal lives a snake pit of fear—their fear is, in fact, a self-imposed affliction. Their fear is toxic and lethal. It is only when their fears are attached to a pole and lifted up so that they can be seen clearly for what they are, that the people find that in looking upon them—that in seeing the snakes within—they are healed.

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,” Jesus says, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life”—eternal life—life abundant—life that is breaking into the world—until it overflows the walls separating heaven and earth—overflows the distinction between now and the future, already and not-yet—re-connecting heaven and earth—manifesting the Kingdom of God here and now—in our midst, within us as a body.

Friends, often when we are gathered at the table I will invite us to participate in the invocation of the Holy Spirit. God reaches down and takes our uplifted hands, and love from above courses down into the world through us. The promise that is given to us is that in Jesus Christ the connection between heaven and earth is re-established—the great circuit of love is closed—so that love itself flows from God to us and through us to the world and returns to God. That uplifted hand is an embodied prayer—it is the practice of our vocation—a way of acting out what is happening to us in this meal. We are participating in the healing of the world, participating in the great circuit of love.

But like the children of Israel, after all that God has done for us, giving us all that is necessary to live in freedom—in order to be opened, to be given sight, to be enlightened, to rise with Jesus Christ on Easter morning—indeed, in order

to enter the Promised Land and build the Beloved Community right here in our own city—we still have to do the inner work before we can truly live in freedom—we still have to learn to let go of our fear—and paradoxically, this requires that we must first own it.

We must first see ourselves and our faults clearly—not because God wants to punish us, or rub our faces in it—but because until we own our fear and our faults—we will be forever ruled by them. And that is not our destiny. God’s love is so much bigger than our fear.

So, be not afraid. May we see the snakes within and without—and in so doing be delivered of them. The world is waiting for our courage. Amen.