

Nicodemus Talks With Jesus
 (or, “Do You Believe That
 God So Loved the World?”)
 John 3:14-21
 March 22, 2009 – Lent 4
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA– Rock Hill
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JOHN 3:14-21 (NRSV) [Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus]

- 14 “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.
 16 “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.
 17 “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.
 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.
 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.
 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.
 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

“Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God has made.” (Genesis 3:1; RSV)

That is the way that one of the parables in The Book of Genesis begins. It is a story from prehistoric times by which the ancient Jewish theologians tried to explain about

the origin of SIN.

You will recall that the temptation used by the serpent or snake was to eat of the fruit of **the forbidden tree**. It was the temptation of disobedience.

It was the temptation to be, not the created one
 but the Creating One, YAHWEH, Almighty God!

[Have YOU ever wanted to play God?]

When Eve responded that she had been told that if she ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree she would die, the snake told THE BIG LIE! The snake said:

“You will not die! For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

[Genesis 3:4-5; RSV]

Every time that you and I look at a snake slithering along on its belly because it does not have any legs, you and I ought to remember that the ancient Jewish story-teller said that the reason that the snake does not have any legs is because

that is its punishment for telling THE BIG LIE!

By that parable, **the snake is credited with damning people.**

By what some people consider to be another parable (and this is a textual criticism debate among Biblical scholars!), **the snake is credited with saving people!**

This latter story grows out of that period of Israelite history which is referred to as the wilderness wanderings. It occurs after Moses has led the Hebrew Children, the Children of Israel/Jacob, out of slavery in Egypt. They have been set free, they have been given fresh water and Manna, and still the Hebrew Children, the Children of Israel/Jacob, *murmur* and *complain* and *gripe* and *whine*. The story is told in the book of Numbers in the Torah; it was read earlier this morning as our Old Testament lesson.

The “**fiery serpent story**” is one of those stories that told about one instance of complaining. YAHWEH God simply made it tougher on the people by exposing them to snakes which bit them, causing inflammation at the point of the bite and death as a result. Hence came the term “**fiery serpents.**”

Then, God had his man Moses make a bronze replica of a snake and put it up on a pole in the air. If a person who had been bitten by a snake came to look at YAHWEH’s

pole with the snake up on it, then that person was saved from death! It was a sort-of primitive “faith healing” which made the people once again dependent upon YAHWEH God and God’s servant, Moses.

The **snake** then became a symbol not of damnation and death as in the Genesis story but rather a symbol of **salvation and life!**

It is with reference to this Old Testament parable that today’s passage in The Gospel of John begins; Jesus is speaking:

**“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.”**

[John 3:14; RSV]

The person to whom Jesus was speaking was NICODEMUS, a ruler of the Jews.

Tradition has it that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Court before which Jesus was brought when he was accused of blasphemy.

It was to NICODEMUS that Jesus spoke about being “**born again.**” This is a term which is a common term today, and it all goes back to this encounter of NICODEMUS with Jesus when Jesus tells him that a person must be born again.

The RSV has Jesus saying to NICODEMUS: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born anew**, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”* [John 3:3]

The NRSV has Jesus saying to NICODEMUS: *“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being **born from above.**”*

Perhaps the most helpful translation of this passage that I have run across is that of the Baptist Greek scholar, Clarence Jordan; his translation is known as “The Cotton Patch Version.” Listen as I read the story from it:

Now there was a very prominent churchman by the name of Nicodemus. This man came to Jesus one night and said, “Professor, we are aware that you are an inspired teacher, because nobody could present the marvelous things you’re presenting without God’s help.”

“I want to make it clear,” Jesus answered, “that no one can be a member of God’s family unless he is fathered from above.”

Nicodemus asked, “But how can a man be fathered once he is born? He can’t return to his mother’s womb and be re-fathered, can he?”

Jesus replied, “Except a person be fathered by both semen and Spirit, he can’t be a member of God’s family. Flesh fathers flesh, and Spirit fathers spirit. Don’t be surprised, then, that I told you that people have to be fathered from above. The wind blows as it will, and you listen to its sound, but you have no idea where it’s coming from or where it’s going. It’s like that when a person is fathered by the Spirit.”

[Jordan, Clarence, The Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John, New York, Association Press, 1970 , John 3:1-8]

Those of you who watch soap operas on television understand the tension of having to wait from Friday until Monday to learn what happens to one of your favorite characters. It is the same way with Nicodemus. We are going to have to wait until we see God face to face in order to learn what happened to Nicodemus; for, we are not told if Nicodemus even understood this saying of Jesus, and we do not know what later happened to Nicodemus after Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathaea buried the body of Jesus after the crucifixion.

The Bible says that the last words of Jesus to Nicodemus were:

***“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.”***
[John 3:14-15; RSV]

NOW LISTEN CAREFULLY TO THIS:

Because the earliest manuscripts of the Bible in both Greek and Hebrew used no quotation marks to indicate the beginning and ending of a person’s spoken words, there is some debate as to whether or not the next five verses in our text are the continuing words

of Jesus.....or, the editorial comment of the gospel-writer John. **Whichever you choose does not effect the impact or the truth of the teaching.**

The major thrust of the passage before us today is in Verse #16:

***“For God so loved the world that He gave His only son,
that whoever believes in Him
should not perish but have eternal life.”***

The great 16th century reformer Martin Luther referred to this verse as

“the Gospel within the Gospel.”

William Barclay refers to it as **“everybody’s text.”**

It is perhaps the most memorized and best known verse in the New Testament.

LOOK AT IT: It reminds us that there is a God...
 that God is a God of love.....

 that the *extent of God’s love* is to the whole world...

 that the *expression of God’s love* takes the form of
 the self-giving of God through the death of His Son.....

 that the *hope of God’s love* is that you and I will
 believe God and want to be with God forever.

My friends: that is the Gospel. That is the Good News.

**“Turning on a light in a room full of rats and roaches
is not an occasion of joy for rats and roaches.”**

(Craddock, Fred, John, Atlanta,
John Knox Press, 1982, p. 31)

Fred Craddock, who for years taught Homiletics at Emory University in Atlanta, wrote that.

**“Turning on a light in a room full of rats and roaches
is not an occasion of joy for rats and roaches.”**

Are you interested in where I found that little “gem” of a saying from Fred Craddock?

It was in a Bible commentary that he has written and it deals with today's passage of scripture which tells us that you and I need to be born again, you and I need to be born from above.

The gospel-writer John, in what some feel is an editorial comment on our need to be born again, states:

“This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” [3:19; NRSV]

What would you do with a statement like that?

“This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” [3:19; NRSV]

For the gospel-writer John, the Light was Jesus of Nazareth.

Earlier, in Chapter #1, John has set the stage: “The true light, that enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” [1:9; NRSV]

For the gospel-writer John, the Light was Jesus of Nazareth.

Do YOU agree with John?

Do YOU believe that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Light of the world?

And what about the rest of verse 19: “...people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”

How do YOU deal with that in your own life?

“...people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”

I want to share with you what is called “a Fred Craddock story.”

I used to go home to west Tennessee, where an old high school chum of mine had a restaurant. I called him Buck. Go home for Christmas, “Merry Christmas, Buck,” and I'd get a piece of chess pie and cup of coffee free. “Merry Christmas, Buck,” I'd say. Every year it was the same.

I went in, “Merry Christmas, Buck.”

He said, “Let's go for coffee.”

I said, “What's the matter? Isn't this the restaurant?”

He said, “I don't know. Sometimes I wonder.”

We went for coffee. We sat there and pretty soon he said, “Did you see the curtain?”

I said, "Buck, I saw the curtain. I always see the curtain."

What he meant by *curtain* is this: they have a number of buildings in that little town; they're called shotgun buildings. They're long buildings and have two entrances, front and back. One's off the street, and one's off the alley, with a curtain and the kitchen in the middle. His restaurant is in one of those. If you're white, you come off the street; if you're black, you come off the alley.

He said, "Did you see the curtain?"

I said, "I saw the curtain."

He said, "The curtain has to come down."

I said, "Good. Bring it down."

He said, "That's easy for you to say. Come in here from out of state and tell me how to run my business."

I said, "Okay, leave it up."

He said, "I can't leave it up."

I said, "Well, then take it down."

"I can't take it down." He's in terrible shape. After a while he said, "If I take that curtain down, I lose a lot of my customers. If I leave that curtain up, I lose my soul."

[Craddock, Fred B., *Craddock Stories* edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001, p. 61]

The gospel-writer John says: "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." [3:19; NRSV]

Those words are what made Fred Craddock comment:

**"Turning on a light in a room full of rats and roaches
is not an occasion of joy for rats and roaches."**

The explanation that the gospel-writer John gives is this:

"For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light,
so that their deeds may not be exposed.
But those who do what is true come to the light,
so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."
[3:20-21; NRSV]

The late **Charles Allen**, one of the memorable pastors in the United Methodist Church, told of a man named **George Wilson**. George Wilson lived in the 1800s and killed a man who caught him in the act of robbing the mail. George Wilson was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged. However, **Andrew Jackson**, the President of

the United States, studied his case and sent him a *presidential pardon*. But George Wilson refused to accept the presidential pardon, and so the case was carried to the Supreme Court.

Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, **John Marshall**, wrote the opinion of the court, and in it said: *“A pardon is a slip of paper, the value of which is determined by the acceptance of the person to be pardoned. If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must be hanged.”*

[Allen, Charles L., Roads to Radiant Living, New York, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1951, p. 139]

And so, George Wilson was hanged!

My friends: Just as those bitten by the snake had to look up at the bronze snake on the pole held by Moses, so must you and I, deceived by the snake in the garden, look up to the cross on which God has given us God’s very Being in Jesus Christ.

IF WE CHOOSE NOT TO LOOK, THEN WE ARE LOST!

***“For God so loved the world that God gave His only Son,
that whoever believes in him
should not perish but have eternal life.”***

Now, if you came to Oakland Avenue Church this morning to hear Good News,
you just heard it!