

LENT 2021
The Journey to Jerusalem
“Jesus Will Be Lifted Up”
John 3:1-21
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It’s embarrassing to admit this, but I’m often not the quickest to pick up on plot subtleties in movies I watch or books I read. I like to think it’s because I take things at face value, but I may just be slow to catch on. Greta and the kids frequently get annoyed with me when I need to pause the television or ask a question in the movie theatre to make sure I understand what just happened.

As we’ve been walking through our Lenten series, “The Journey to Jerusalem,” I’ve emphasized how frequently Jesus alluded to or spoke directly about the cross and his approaching crucifixion. The cross and his impending death were always on Jesus’ mind and He spoke about it often, but his disciples and others around Him rarely seemed to understand what He was saying when He spoke about his death.

Take last week’s Scripture passage—Jesus’ clearing of the temple—as an example. After Jesus upset the tables of the money changers and drove out merchants and animals with a whip, the religious leaders asked Jesus what authority He had to do that. He said, *“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it in three days.”* He was referring to his own death, but the religious leaders thought He meant the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and John tells us the disciples didn’t understand what Jesus was referring to until after He was resurrected from the grave. I can identify with their slowness to understand. If I was a 1st Century disciple of Jesus, I’m pretty sure I would have been just as clueless as they were.

In our Scripture passage today—John chapter 3—a respected Jewish scholar came to Jesus with an important question, and he was completely befuddled by Jesus’ response. At one point Jesus’ told him, *“You are Israel’s teacher, and you do not understand these things?”* I encourage you to follow along as I read John chapter 3 verses 1-21.

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

“How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. John 3:1-21

The lectionary reading for today doesn’t begin until verse 14 of John chapter 3, but I’ll touch on Nicodemus’ dialogue with Jesus in verses 1-13 to help us better understand the verses that follow. I do, however, want to point out a few things about Nicodemus because he is one of the more intriguing characters in Jesus’ story. Nicodemus was a Pharisee—the respected religious leaders of whom Jesus was often so critical. We’re not given many details, but Nicodemus was apparently attracted to Jesus’ teaching, so he visited Him at night—presumably because being seen with Jesus was unacceptable for a Pharisee. During his dialogue with Jesus Nicodemus was completely unable to grasp what He was saying, and the passage ends with

Nicodemus still confused. Nicodemus could have faded into obscurity without us thinking of him again, but he makes two other brief but important appearances in John's Gospel.

In John chapter 7 the temple guards had been instructed by the chief priests and Pharisees to arrest Jesus and bring Him back to them. When the guards came back empty-handed, the religious leaders interrogated them. during their conversation Nicodemus defended Jesus by asking, *"Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?"* The religious leaders retorted, *"Are you from Galilee too? Look into it and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."* Nicodemus enters Jesus' story again in John chapter 19 after Jesus had been crucified. A wealthy follower of Jesus named Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for Jesus' body, so that he could give him a proper burial and Joseph was accompanied by Nicodemus, who brought 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus, who came to talk with Jesus at night, later defended Jesus in a dialogue with his peers, and finally helped ensure Jesus was buried properly, appears to have become a follower of Jesus.

Now let's look at verse 14, the start of our text for today. At the conclusion of Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus where we read these words,

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. John 3:14-18

Most of us are very familiar with John 3-16-18. Those verses may be the clearest explanation of salvation in the New Testament, but what about verses 14 & 15? *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."* Two thousand years after Jesus' crucifixion, we understand the statement *"the Son of Man must be lifted up,"* referred to Jesus on the cross, but the reference to Moses lifting up a snake in the wilderness seems obscure. Jesus' hearers were often confused about things He said, but this statement is one that any devout Jew would have immediately understood. Jesus was pointing back to a well-known event recorded in Numbers chapter 21 verses 4-9. Follow along as I read this passage of Scripture...

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived. Numbers 21:4-9

The Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land under normal circumstances could have taken as little as three months, but their trip was prolonged by their constant complaining, their resistance to Moses' leadership and their consistent disobedience of God. Someone has said it only took hours for the Israelites to get out of Egypt, but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of the Israelites. Israel's time in the desert was God's opportunity to re-shape his people to become the people of God.

On the occasion we just read about, the Israelites were complaining against God and Moses, again. So, God sent a plague of venomous snakes which bit the people, causing many to die. Amidst the carnage the Israelites confessed their sin and asked Moses to pray for them. As Moses prayed, God instructed him to craft a bronze snake and put it on a pole. When those who were bitten by a snake looked at the bronze snake on the pole, their life was spared. In the face of their grievous sin, God made a provision for the lives of the people to be spared. It was this event Jesus referred to when He told Nicodemus that everyone who believed on Him would have eternal life. *"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."*

This is the heart of the Easter message. Jesus was lifted up on the cross where He died for our sins. As we place our faith in Him, we're able to receive eternal life. The Gospel writer, John, Jesus' beloved disciple, goes on to say,

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. John 3:16-18

Just as Nicodemus (and the disciples and many others who heard Jesus teach and preach) struggled to understand what Jesus was saying, the words in John chapter 3 verses 16-18 don't naturally make sense to us, because they run counter to what we intuitively believe about God. *"For God so loved the world..."* Many look around and see the violence, the hunger, the poverty, the hurt and brokenness in our world, and wonder, *"If there even is a god, how could he be a god of love?"* God's answer to that question: *"I love the world and the people in it so much that I sent my very own Son to this earth to live and die and be raised to life for you. All that is required of you is for you to believe in me—to place your faith in me—and you'll have eternal life."* Many of us have an innate sense that God is a harsh god of judgment and condemnation—always on the lookout for us to go astray so that He can discipline us and bring us back into line. God says, *"I didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn it. I sent Jesus so that the world could be saved through Him. If you believe, you won't be condemned. Those who remain condemned are those who don't place their faith in God's one and only Son, Jesus."*

I've asked Pastor John King to interview Jacob Weiland this morning. You'll hear more of Jacob's story on Easter, but I asked him to share part of his story today, because like Nicodemus, Jacob struggled for a long time to make sense of what accepting Jesus meant. Eventually he placed his faith in Jesus, just as we read about in John chapter 3.

Jacob Weiland

Like Nicodemus, like the religious leaders, like Jesus' disciples, it's a struggle for many of us to place our faith in Jesus, because faith doesn't make sense. Nicodemus asked, *"How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"* Jesus' response to Nicodemus is his response to us, *"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the Spirit."* In other words, spiritual truth can't be grasped by rational thinking alone. It's only as God's Spirit stirs our hearts, that we can receive spiritual truth. *"Spirit gives birth to the Spirit."* As a pastor, I've encountered numerous people who didn't think they could accept Jesus, because they had doubts and didn't think they had enough faith. They were trying to rationalize their way to belief in Jesus. In the face of their doubts, I encouraged them to make a choice to place their faith in Jesus.

Over the past 9 months, since we began meeting outside for worship in July and then transitioned back inside in October, we've had many individuals and families begin connecting with our church in person and online. I've gotten to know some of you over the course of that time, but many of you I haven't met and don't know. I want to put the opportunity before you this morning to take the step of placing your faith in Jesus—receiving his forgiveness for your sin and accepting his life, now and for eternity. Perhaps like Nicodemus, you've struggled to believe, to get past your thinking, and place your faith in Jesus. You're not alone. Jesus tells us that flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. In other words, we can't think our way to God. It's only as his Spirit leads us that we can respond in placing our faith in Him.

Here's my encouragement to you. If you're here this morning and you've not taken the step of accepting Jesus by faith, ask yourself if that is something you're attracted to—something you feel drawn toward? If so, I want you to know that your sense of being attracted or drawn is God's Spirit at work in you. In response, I encourage you to make the choice to step into that decision by faith. In doing that, you're essentially saying, *"God, I can't get to you in my human thinking, but based on what I sense you're doing in me, I accept you by faith today. I accept that you love me and that as I place my faith in you, I can have your life."* If you're making that decision today or even considering it, I invite you to come up during our response time to talk with me or with Pastor Susan or with one of our prayer team people. If you're worshiping online with us today, you can reach out to Pastor Cindy Agoncillo—our online pastor this morning—**by sending a private message to McBIC's Facebook page**. Pastor Cindy will also put the email addresses of Pastor John, Pastor Susan and myself in the comments section of your screen if you'd like to connect with one of us after the service. As we enter our time of response in singing, I encourage you to respond to God's movement in your life.