

Born Again
John 3:1-21, Numbers 21:4-9

Why does Jesus always seem to jump to the middle of a conversation? Oh, sure, it's obvious to everyone that Nicodemus is beating around the bush when he says, "We know you are a teacher who has come from God." It's obvious that what Nicodemus really wants to know is who Jesus is.

Okay, so why doesn't Jesus just tell Nicodemus what he really wants to know? Why doesn't Jesus say something like, "Look, Nicodemus, I'm the Messiah you've been waiting for. So you can stop trusting in all those ritual sacrifices in the temple. Stop trying to save yourself by your attempts to keep the Law of Moses. I'm the one to Whom all those sacrifices point. I'm the only one who can fully follow the Law, because I'm the One Who wrote the law. I'm God, come in the flesh. Just trust me, and I will save you."

That's what we expect Jesus to say, because that is the essence of the gospel, a gospel that finds one of its most succinct summaries in verse 16 of this chapter. The amazing good news is that God sent His only Son into the world to save whoever would believe in, whoever would place his trust in Jesus. The good news is that those who trust Jesus will not receive the death penalty that their sins deserve, but instead have everlasting life in the presence of God forever.

So, why doesn't Jesus start with John 3:16? Why does He insist on talking about all this "born again" stuff in the preceding verses?

Well, maybe Jesus was just trying to begin at the beginning. Think about the process of birth. Does a baby decide when and where and to whom he will be born? In fact, the word "born" itself underscores the passivity of the whole process – we are born, we cannot "birth" ourselves. In the same way, Jesus is telling us that we aren't in charge of initiating the process of our spiritual rebirth.

This is hard to understand, even for those who already know Who Jesus is, so perhaps we should be patient with Nicodemus. Instead of grasping what Jesus is saying, look at the question Nicodemus asks Jesus in verse 4 – "Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

This question isn't as silly as it sounds. For even if we admit our need for rebirth, we tend to want to know how we can go about doing it. Like Nicodemus, we want to know, "What do I need to do to be reborn?"

Asking the question should be enough to answer it. If there is nothing a baby does to be born, of course there is simply nothing we can do to be reborn. God has to take the initiative if we are to enter the kingdom of God.

Preacher, is that really what Jesus is saying? Well, look at the image he uses in verse 8 to describe this new life – the wind. He says that it blows where it wants to, just as God sends His Spirit, just as God breathes new life into His people because He wants to.

Think about the wind. You can't see it. All you can see are its effects – the leaves that it blows and the trees that it bends. Just so, you can see the repentance and faith and good works that the new life produces. You can see the symptoms of life. But God is the giver of life. God is the One Who breathes the breath, the spirit, the wind of life into dry bones. And just like the wind, the Spirit of God blows where He wishes.

Now, that probably wasn't what Nicodemus was expecting. He had doubtless been taught since his own birth that he had to follow God's law to the letter in order to be acceptable in God's sight. The idea of God taking the initiative in the salvation process would have been foreign to him.

But we modern Americans aren't very different. We tend to see ourselves as basically good, and as generally competent. When we think about spiritual matters, we also want to know what we need to do to be saved. We want to know the seven habits of highly effective Christians so we can get busy getting ourselves shaped up. After all, isn't that why we come to Church, to improve ourselves?

Look, I know we don't want to hear about how sinful and how helpless we are. Nicodemus and the rest of the religious leaders probably didn't want to hear it, either. That's what Jesus said in verses 11 and 12. He said they hadn't received His witness. He said they hadn't believed what He said. But are we modern American Christians any more willing to listen to Jesus?

We should be, for we already know the answer to Nicodemus' basic question. We already know Who Jesus is – the Son of God. We already know what John said about Jesus back in chapter 1 – that He displays to us most clearly the glory of God the Father. That's basically the same thing Jesus says in verses 11-13 – that because Jesus is the Only One Who has descended from Heaven to Earth, He is the only reliable authority on all heavenly matters.

So, if we put all that together, we know that if Jesus says we are helpless sinners in need of a savior, if the Son of God says that we are so spiritually dead that we need to be born again, well, that's what we must be, like it or not.

But are we really that helpless? Do we really need God to intervene on our behalf and to save us? Is there really nothing we can do to improve ourselves or to save ourselves?

Well, look at the image Jesus brings to our attention in verse 14, an image drawn from our responsive reading from Numbers. Jesus reminds us about something that happened to the people of God while they were on their way to the Promised Land.

Note first how sinful the people were. Instead of being grateful, they were grumpy. They complained against God, even while God continued to rain manna down on them, feeding them with miraculous bread from Heaven. From their terrible attitudes, it was pretty clear that, even though God had rescued them from slavery to Pharaoh, the people weren't really very close to God at all.

So, God sent poisonous serpents into the camp to bite the people, to show them in a physical way just how desperate was their spiritual condition. When the snakes bit the people, deadly venom coursed through their veins – but that venom was no more deadly than the sin which was already buried deep within their hearts.

What could they do to be saved? In the days before antivenin was invented, absolutely nothing. A person who had been bitten was as good as dead. It was only a matter of time. And there was nothing he could do about it.

That's just how helpless we all are where it comes to sin. As babies, we may all have been born physically alive, but we were also born spiritually dead. The poison of sin is even now coursing through our veins, separating us from the God Who is light and life. It is because the poison of sin is within us that we tend to love the darkness rather than the light, hiding our thoughts and deeds from each other. In fact, it is precisely because the poison of sin is within us that in our pride we kick against the very idea that we are helpless sinners. But sooner or later, we will all physically succumb to the poison. If left to ourselves, sooner or later we will all die.

But that's why Moses made a big bronze serpent and set it up on a pole in the camp, so that everyone could see it. He told the people that God would save them from certain death, if they would just look at that bronze serpent. And the Scripture simply says this: if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

Brothers and sisters, the God of the bronze serpent is the same God we have today. The same God Who provided one way for His Old Testament people to have new physical life in the wilderness, has lifted up Jesus Christ on the Cross, providing one way for everyone to have new spiritual life today.

No, we don't have any more power to save ourselves than those Old Testament people did. Yes, we are just as helpless, just as dead in our sins as they were. And yes, our only hope is that God would do for us what we can't do for ourselves. Our only hope is that God would give us new life, new hearts that enable us to trust in Jesus and be saved.

And how can we fail to trust God when we know of His love for us? How can we doubt His goodwill when we remember that He gave Jesus to die for sinners just like us? For God would have been completely justified, completely righteous if Jesus had come exactly in the way that His people expected – as a conquering King Who punishes His enemies. But if Jesus had come in that way, no one would have been saved.

And so the good news is that Jesus didn't come into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world from sin and death. And so the same good news comes to us that came to those people in the wilderness and that came to Nicodemus: In Jesus Christ, God saves sinners.

What can we do to be saved? Nothing at all. God calls us instead to have things done for us – to be born again, to receive salvation as a free gift from Him. God calls us to trust Him to do for us what we can't do for ourselves. God calls us to rest in His promises, which have never failed. So, let's believe in, let's place our trust in the One Who is supremely trustworthy. Let's entrust all that we are and all that we have to Him, because He loves us so.