

Snakes Alive!

(JOHN 3:1-16 NRSV) *Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He 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 apart from the presence of God." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The 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." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For 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.*

THE WORD OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD:

At the end of my sophomore year at Baylor I signed up for a summer intern program in southeastern Tennessee and went to work and minister among the mountain people there.

Those people actually enjoyed their religion! One thing I learned growing up was there was never any question between good or bad, right or wrong: if you enjoyed it, it was wrong! That's how I knew my religion was right: it was heavy on the guilt!

But there I was, with people who were savin' souls and fryin' chicken and speaking in tongues and handling snakes and faith healing—just all those wonderful southern mountain things.

Now, I grew up in Mesquite, Texas—Dallas suburb—during my junior year and part of my senior year it was the fastest growing city in the world. I'm talking relatively sophisticated, cosmopolitan place. I took comparative religion at Baylor. I knew all about Jews and Catholics and Baptists... But I didn't know anything about snake-handlers and faith-healers and tongue-speakers.

It was the snake-handlers that really gave me trouble. I thought they were ignorant; superstitious.

A part of my assignment that summer was to teach a Bible study on I Corinthians; and when I came to chapter 12, verse 3, I had an epiphany. It said: "...no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."

It came to me that the confession, "Jesus is Lord" is ecstatic speech. The mountain folk were trying the best way they knew how to testify to their faith.

When I realized that, I found I could listen to them, and I discovered they didn't call themselves "snake-handlers". They just called themselves, "Christians".

But they had stumbled onto a passage over in Mark's Gospel that really turned them on: a verse they could use to **prove** who was a real Christian and who wasn't: *if you could take 'em outta' the box, handle 'em, and put 'em back, you got it. If you can't... No way. If you don't have faith to try, that's one thing. If you try and fail... Sorry 'bout that. There's only two kinds of people: the quick and the dead.*

But I had wasted most of the summer trying to write them off; amusing myself in that way that I had learned to do: making fun of people I didn't understand (as I have just demonstrated for a few minutes here. It's a nice way to handle your anxieties. It works for a little while.)

Fifteen years later the late Dr. James D. Glasse, President of Lancaster Theological Seminary, spoke at our church's General Assembly. He shared a very similar experience. His story helped put my story in perspective; in fact, I borrowed some of his colorful word pictures in telling my story just now. He said many people in the church really are "snake-handlers" at heart, in the sense that they're convinced they can tell who is a real Christian and who's not. The difference is: those mountain folk used real snakes, and we use what he called "spiritual snakes": those questions and riddles we throw at each other and say, "Here, Buster! Handle **that** one!" And if you can handle it to my pre-determined satisfaction, you're O.K.

The text this morning is one of the most familiar in the New Testament; and verse 16 is, without a doubt, the most familiar verse in the Bible. But I've said before, familiarity is not always a blessing. Sometimes it's a problem.

Take the person of Nicodemus, for example. In most sermons I've heard, he's been treated harshly. He was a Pharisee. They were always trying to trap Jesus with trick questions, so Nicodemus is guilty by association! One commentary I read said his approach to Jesus was "sarcastic." I don't know where he got that. It's not in the text. Another commentary makes it an issue that he came "by night." Under cover of darkness, it said—collar turned up, hat brim pulled low.

But what grabs me is not Nicodemus' approach, but Jesus' response. Nicodemus says, *"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform these signs you are doing if God were not with him."* Sounds sincere to me.

And Jesus responds, *"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."* It has nothing whatever to do with Nicodemus' statement.

And what follows is a conversation that at face value is totally confusing! Notice the pattern: Nicodemus asks a question, Jesus responds out of left field, Nicodemus is left scratching his head. And the pattern is repeated.

On the surface, the conversation is a study in disorientation. Nicodemus says, "Born again? You mean, go back into the womb?" And Jesus turns left and talks about

being born of water and spirit—and he talks about flesh and spirit—and he says the wind blows wherever it wants to... He never addresses Nicodemus' comments or answer his questions!

If we are to make sense of it, we need a point of reference; maybe toward the end of the story—in verse 14: *“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.”*

Moses led those Hebrew slaves from the mud pits of Egypt, across the Red Sea, down to the Sinai Peninsula, where God met them in a most dramatic way. They stayed there a long time—probably several years—receiving not only the Ten Commandments, but also a format for national organization and religious discipline.

They built the Tabernacle. The tribe of Levi was trained and prepared for the priesthood. A legal system and a court system were established. And, finally, they moved out toward a land they'd only heard about from their grandfathers around campfires in the evenings.

Along the way they set up camp one night; built their cooking fires and were settling in, when they discovered their camp was infested with poisonous snakes. People were being bitten right and left, and they were falling like flies.

Nothing they did helped. None of their home-remedies and potions countered the snakes' venom. There was no secure place they could go to escape the vicious attacks. The snakes were everywhere!

So Moses prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Moses, "Gather a bunch of bronze, melt it down, make a snake, and put it on a stick."

Moses said, "Right! These people have been brought out here in the desert to live the strange lifestyle of a nomad. They've dealt with poisoned water holes; attacks from Bedouin tribesmen; desert sandstorms and heat; lack of food; now they're watching their babies swell up and die from snake bite, and you want me to make a snake out of scrap metal and put it on a stick?"

The Lord said, *"...anyone who is bitten can look at it and live."* So, Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived. (NUMBERS 21:8-10 NIV)

And Jesus said to Nicodemus, *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”* (JOHN 3:14-15 NIV) It's really no surprise that Nicodemus had trouble with that. We have extraordinary problems with it, ourselves; so, we just ignore it—skip over it and move directly to John 3:16. We don't need no stinking context!

We've walked on the moon, cured most diseases known to man, and can prevent, or at least reduce the risks and symptoms related to the diseases we can't cure. We've almost eliminated smallpox and polio from the planet. We can predict the weather with 80-90% accuracy.

We own our own homes—and automobiles—we've earned our own way and paid for it ourselves, some of us overcoming great obstacles along the way. We're "doers!" But there still are areas of human experience over which we have no control: limits, edges, boundaries...

For some, the ultimate loss of control is death. For others, it's life, itself, with its addictive connections to alcohol, sex, work, money, power... Some people's schedules are out of control, some are overwhelmed by grief or by guilt. Nobody escapes! Everybody, sooner or later, reaches the limits of his/her existence.

But in success-oriented, over-achieving, W.A.S.P.M.C. America, the response probably will be: "I can handle it." For most Americans, the most difficult words in the English language are, "I can't." That's why Christianity is so difficult for some people, because that's precisely where Christianity begins: "I can't do it myself."

Moses said to the people of Israel, "When you've been bitten, and the poison is coursing through your veins—when it's *beyond your control*—look at the snake on the stick, and you'll live."

Jesus said, "As Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness..." When your life is out of control, look to the one on the cross, and you'll have eternal life."

That's it! Paul called it "the foolishness of the cross." Our faith calls it "Grace." No great achievement on our part; no great act of penance; no great act of religious devotion or noble service or heroic sacrifice. Those are good things; but the fact is: there's nothing we *can* do except look to the one on the cross.

And when we reach that point—when we get beyond the point of trying to be good enough or generous enough or committed enough or compassionate enough that God will have to let us in, we discover that the door was never locked.

It's at that point that the journey really begins.

Wednesday is Ash Wednesday: the first day of lent. The theme this year—in our Wednesday study group each week and in the sermons each Sunday—will deal with life's uncertainties.

Christianity begins, not in any act of doing, but solely in the act of "letting go" of all attempts to make it on our own, and instead trusting fully in the foolishness of the cross. It sounds too easy; but that's why it's called "Good News!"