

## Snakes Alive!

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

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. If you saw the movie, "Deliverance," it was like that.

The people there actually enjoyed their religion! And one thing I had learned growing up: there was no question between good and bad, right and wrong: if you enjoyed it, it was wrong! That's how I knew my religion was right: it was such a drag!

But, here 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 Dallas, Texas, which, back then, was relatively sophisticated and cosmopolitan. I'd had comparative religion at Baylor. I knew all about Jews and Catholics and Baptists... I didn't know anything about snake-handlers and faith-healers and tongue-speakers.

The snake-handlers were the ones that really gave me trouble. I thought they were ignorant; superstitious; they just didn't understand.

A part of my assignment during the summer was to teach a Bible study on I Corinthians; and when I came to chapter 12, verse 3 caught my attention. It said: "Therefore I tell you that 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 these people were trying to say, "Jesus is Lord;" trying the best way they knew how to testify to their faith.

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

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

Fifteen years later I met a Presbyterian minister who shared a similar experience. His insight helped put my story in perspective. He showed me that a lot of people in the church really are "snake-handlers" at heart, in the sense that they're convinced they can tell who's a real Christian and who's not. The difference is: those mountain folks 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 satisfaction, you're O.K.

The text this morning contains, without a doubt, the most familiar verse in the Bible: John 3:16. But I've said before, familiarity is not always a blessing. Sometimes it's a problem.

Take the person of Nicodemus. In the sermons I've heard, he's treated harshly. He was a Pharisee; and they were always trying to trap Jesus with trick questions. Nicodemus is assumed 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 an issue of the fact that he came "by night." Under cover of darkness, it said—collar turned up, hat brim pulled low.

But, what interests 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."* I guess it could be sarcastic.

But 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 there follows a conversation which, if taken 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 shifts gears: talks about being born of water and spirit—then talks about flesh and spirit—then says the wind blows wherever it wants to... He never does address any of Nicodemus' comments or answer any of his questions! I think Jesus was reading between the lines.

John's gospel is the only New Testament source that names Nicodemus; but many scholars suggest that the "rich young ruler" of the other gospels is Nicodemus. We have to be careful here; but, if that's so, the other gospels say he came asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life"—or "to inherit the kingdom of God?" That would help Jesus' responses make a lot more sense.

Again, it is possible to make a case; but, we have to be careful with this. Staying with John's gospel, the conversation leads us to a point of reference toward the end—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."*

That's where the snakes come in, you see. Moses had led that band of Hebrew slaves out of the brickyards and mud pits of Egypt, across the Red Sea, down into the Sinai Peninsula; and God had met them there in a most dramatic fashion. 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 for priesthood. A legal system with a court system was established. Finally, they moved out toward a land they'd only heard of from their grandfathers around campfires in the evenings.

One night they set up camp; built their cooking fires and were settling in, when they discovered their camp was infested with poisonous snakes. Some believe they were carpet vipers. People were being bitten right and left, 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 snakes were everywhere!

So Moses prayed, 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 life-style of a nomad. They've dealt with poisoned water holes; attacks from Bedouin tribesmen; desert sand storms 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 what Jesus was saying. We have extraordinary problems with it, ourselves.

We can walk on the moon. We've almost eliminated smallpox and polio from the planet. We can predict the weather with, probably, 80-90% accuracy. We own our own homes—and automobiles—we've earned our own way and paid for it ourselves. Some of us have overcome great obstacles. We are "doers!"

But there still are areas of human experience over which we have no control: limits, edges, boundaries, and, eventually, death. For some, it's life, itself, that presents the boundaries: addictive connections to alcohol, sex, work, money, power. Some people's schedules are out of control, some are overwhelmed by guilt. Nobody escapes! Everyone, sooner or later, reaches the limits of his/her existence.

But in success-oriented, over-achieving, W.A.S.P.M.C. America, no matter what the experience, the response probably will be: "I can handle it." For most people, the most difficult words in the English language are, "I can't." And that's why Christianity is difficult for some people, because that's precisely where Christianity begins: "I can't do it."

Moses said to the people of Israel, "When you've been bitten, and the poison is already 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."

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 or religious devotion or noble service or heroic sacrifice. The fact is: there's nothing we can do except look to the one on the cross.

And until we reach that point—until 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—until we get over that expectation, we have not yet entered the kingdom of heaven.

On our part, 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 ridiculous foolishness of the cross. It sounds too easy; but that's why it's called "Good News!"