

Being Born Again

John 3:14-21 (John 3:1-21)

March 22, 2009

And just as Moses was 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.

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.

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. 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.

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. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deed 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.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Susan Whaley, one of our two church secretaries that are both worth their weight in gold, asks me for a sermon title every Thursday on the weeks that I preach.

It is a good thing she didn't ask me any earlier than that this week. If she had, the sermon title you would see in your bulletin might read: "Evangelicals Behaving Badly" or "The Problem with Misreading the Bible" or, maybe, "Pen's Diatribe Against Christians Who Take The Good News Out Of The Gospel."

You see, I have issues.

I suspect that I am like many of you in the fact that when I read this part of John's gospel, my mind wanders to examples of when I have seen this text misused as a way to fence people out of the Christian community instead of inviting them in.

"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."

John 3:16. Perhaps the most recognized verse in scripture; quoted on billboards and in baseball parks around the country.

It is not that I deny the power of this verse – a verse that Martin Luther described as "the gospel in miniature." Indeed, it is because of the power of this verse that people use it in inappropriate ways.

For me John 3:16 represents a brand of Christianity that makes me suspicious. I am tired of seeing the Bible used as a way to exclude people from the good news of the gospel. Growing up in the South, for too long I have been asked or have seen others been asked the question: "are you saved?" or "are you born again?"

It is my experience that there is no good news in that question. There is no genuine hope for salvation, no authentic care for the person who has this question put to them. Questions like these simply serve to paint bright lines around a particular version of the Christian faith that is set apart and above from any other.

“Are you saved?” “Are you born again?” Really, the question is, “do you believe what I believe.” And if the answer to that is “no” – then God have mercy on your soul.

There are too many stories of people – many of them my friends and family – who have been wounded by an expression of Christianity that is predicated upon defining one group of believers over and against another.

Can you tell that I carry some baggage?

I have the tendency to want to explain away verses in scripture that suggest exclusivity. Where John 3:16 suggests that *unless* you believe in Jesus Christ you will perish, I am comforted by the next verse that suggests that God is more interested in saving the world than our response to that act of salvation: “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.”

I have this tendency – not because I have an argument with God about whom God chooses to save – but because most times the verses that seem exclusive become the sharpest weapons for people to wield who want to define their own Christian territory.

You know the kind of territory I am talking about: the territory where the mystery of the Christian faith is boiled down to nothing more than a list of beliefs that have a lot to do with personal behavior but little to do with loving your neighbor; the territory where the criticism of the world is fierce but a critical look at yourself is avoided.

It is in this territory that I have seen Bible verses that suggest exclusion be used as weapons.

And it pains me. It pains me when I see the good news of Jesus Christ being used as a way to keep people from an experience of Jesus Christ. The central message of our gospel and our faith is so much more than “believe or else.” The good news we have received in Jesus Christ is not meant to be used as a warning, it is meant to be life-giving and life-changing. It is not meant to be parceled out to the undeserving by those of us who deserve it, it is meant to be showered upon all people who could not possibly earn its reward.

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Can you tell that I carry some baggage?

If Susan had asked me for a sermon title before Thursday afternoon, this is what I would have preached today. And although I stand by what I have just said – I recognize that my initial interpretation of this scripture is nothing more than a reaction to the way I have seen this scripture misused.

And that does not do justice to what this scripture is about.

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In this passage Jesus is responding to a Pharisee named Nicodemus. We don't know a whole lot about Nicodemus. We see him pop up two other times in John's gospel – once to defend Jesus in a confrontation with the Pharisees and once to help Joseph of Aramethia carry Jesus' body from the cross to the tomb.

One detail that we do know, however, is that Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. Did you catch that? Nicodemus came to seek out Jesus at night.

The more we hear about Nicodemus the more we understand the significance of this fact. Nicodemus seeks out Jesus because he has heard about the signs he had performed and he wanted to understand. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus is confident in his own beliefs. He has his mind made up. Nicodemus thinks if he could just ask Jesus some questions about these signs, then he might be able to comprehend this new show in town that everyone was talking about.

What Nicodemus gets for his trouble is Jesus telling him that to truly understand what the kingdom of God is about a person must be born again. That word phrase can also be translated, "born anew." For Nicodemus, this doesn't compute. He takes Jesus literally and misses the point: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

You see, Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. In John's gospel, night isn't a chronology, it is a theology.¹ John is the one who describes Jesus as the Light of the world: "what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." John is the one who assures us that in Jesus Christ "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." John uses the metaphor of light and darkness to describe the world's response to the presence of Jesus Christ. As we heard in today's passage, "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and the people loved darkness rather than light..."

Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. The way John tells it, that doesn't say much about what time it was when Nicodemus came to see Jesus. But it says a whole lot about what Nicodemus was willing to believe. Or not believe.

It was night because the signs that brought Nicodemus to Jesus could only make sense in the light of a new birth that Nicodemus could not understand.² It was night because Nicodemus held tightly to the religious knowledge he had acquired before meeting Jesus, and was therefore blind to the newness of Jesus' teaching and revelation.³ It was night because when he was faced with a choice – about whether he could believe that new life, or new birth – by water and the Spirit – could be possible – Nicodemus chose to go with what was comfortable and familiar.

Yet even into night, and in response to Nicodemus' unwillingness to believe, Jesus speaks of God's commitment to a world that lives in darkness: "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."

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I think that each of us have a little Nicodemus lurking inside. There are squares in our patchwork quilt of faith where our minds are made

¹ Are, Tom, "Nic at Night" (Sermon from May 22, 2005)

² Schneider, Sandra, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Herder and Herder, New York, 1999) p. 124.

³ *ibid*

up – where, by intellectual stubbornness or a history of hurt or pain – we have trouble giving into the idea that God knows a lot more about grace and forgiveness and love and mercy and salvation than we do. And when you think about it that way – isn't that good news?

Nicodemus manifests himself in me when I feel the need to protect those around me and the faith tradition that I hold dear from the people who misinterpret the gospel as a message of exclusion. But God doesn't need my help. The Light will still shine. And instead of footnoting the gospel of God's salvation so that it is acceptable to me and the world around me – what I need to do is receive it as it was intended: as good news.

When it comes to the central matters of grace and forgiveness and love and mercy and salvation – being born anew by water and spirit means that we leave behind our notions of who gets it and how they get it and why they get it.

We are to leave behind our need to know and even to explain the mystery of our faith.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”

Let all who have ears, hear!

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Amen.