

The Grace Of New Birth

John 3:1-7, 14-21

March 20, 2011

I.

I once heard an old preacher describe today's Gospel reading from John. He said it's about whether we will spend eternity in the smoking section, or the nonsmoking section. And while that might be a clever metaphor, this story of the nighttime conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus goes right to the core of our Christian beliefs and doctrines about salvation.

The reading begins with Jesus being questioned by Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee. Pharisees, as we recall, comprised the Jewish sect that often challenged Jesus and his ministry. Perhaps that's why Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He didn't want his Jewish colleagues to see him.

And Nicodemus also wanted to learn. He was more user-friendly than other Pharisees because he accepted that Jesus had come from God, and that his miracles were of divine origin. And we eventually learn that Nicodemus helped bury Jesus' body after the crucifixion (Jn. 19:39).

But in today's reading Nicodemus had some questions. Jesus already had introduced new understandings of faith and belief as he described the kingdom of God. He gave new meaning to the work of the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus obviously raised these matters with Jesus that night, and received an explanation that defined three principles inherent in our Christian hope.

First, we must be born from above to enter the kingdom of God. Second, God loves us so much that he gave Jesus, his only Son, that we might live forever in God's presence. And third, people who do not accept Jesus in this way are condemned to judgment. There's good news and bad news. Let's look at them in more detail.

II.

We can begin with the idea of being "born from above." Some Bibles, including the King James version with which many of us grew up, translate that as being "born again." Both are correct. John wrote his Gospel in Greek, the literary language of the time, and he used a Greek word with no English counterpart that could mean either born from above, or born again, or both.

But this confused Nicodemus who was thinking in terms of physical birth, and he asked how a person's mother could give birth to the same person twice. Jesus, however, was speaking of spirituality rather than obstetrics, and explained that we must be born of both water and the Spirit to enter God's kingdom.

Being born of water is easy to understand in the context of our own baptisms. The meaning of birth in the Spirit, however, is more complex.

In the Episcopal church, and in many Protestant churches, we believe spiritual birth comes after baptism, and occurs when we experience a saving faith. It happens as we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We embark on a spiritual journey where our belief takes root, the Holy Spirit shows forth through us in our lives, and we are born again not physically, but spiritually.

And before going further, I briefly should address the term "born again" because it sometimes is misunderstood. In some churches a flash-bang born again experience is a requirement for membership, while other churches reject the entire idea of spiritual birth as unnecessary. Those two viewpoints probably represent the two ends of the spectrum.

Many Episcopalians accept that being born again does mean spiritual transformation. But it can occur in a moment, or it can develop over time. It can be like stepping outside into a heavy

rainstorm and getting soaked right away, or else like standing in a slow drizzle and eventually getting just as wet. But Jesus said it must happen one way or the other to enter God's kingdom.

III.

But this was only part of Jesus' explanation to Nicodemus. Although being born again is our ticket to the kingdom, what does kingdom life really mean? The next part of the reading tells us, and it brings in the Old Testament as background. Nicodemus, being a Pharisee, would have understood how these Hebrew Scriptures could have applied to Jesus' words.

Jesus said that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so also must he be lifted up so that all who believe in him may have eternal life. And we heard about Moses and that serpent in our Old Testament reading today. The pole and serpent offered salvation to Jews bitten by snakes then, and the cross and Jesus offer salvation to humanity now.

And just as an aside, no extra charge, the serpent and the staff today form the symbol used by the American Medical Association, emergency medical services, and other medical organizations.

But back to the reading. Jesus then uttered what could be the most famous words in the Bible. We see them on signs at sporting events and public gatherings. They're on bumper stickers, license plates, coffee mugs, and tee shirts. Sometimes it's just the numbers; 3:16.

Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Hear it again, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

And belief in Jesus necessarily means faith in Jesus. Belief that Jesus died for us is the same as faith that he died for us. Belief in things that cannot be proven by human standards also is faith. Scripture tells us, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). And Paul said that faith is God's gift through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:9).

This means that faith comes to us through God's grace. It is not something we can create or manufacture through our own efforts other than to respond in our humble acceptance of God's gift of salvation in Christ. And acceptance means not only perceiving in our heads, but also receiving in our hearts.

We can start with our heads by making decisions to open ourselves to Jesus. We can decide to read the Bible, be part of a church, or help others in need. That's a start.

But faith goes beyond objective things, and makes itself known in our hearts. Through God's grace we receive a life-giving energy that works within us as we acknowledge Christ's saving work on the cross. This give assurance of our eternal destinies, and leads us to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life now.

So by faith we willingly accept dependence on the activity of God in Christ. And through this wonderful gift we are transformed and know God's peace.

But let's make sure our faith is what we think it is. Faith is not like a spare tire, only to be used in emergencies. Faith is not like a bus or train, only to be ridden when it goes our way. It's not a light switch, to be turned off and on. And, most importantly, faith is not like an insurance policy, something to have just in case everything we hear in church turns out to be true.

Faith instead acts in our lives by causing us to believe truths about God for which we have no evidence, but which are no less real merely because we cannot touch or see or fully understand them. And these realities include God's promise of salvation through Jesus Christ, and God's absolute trustworthiness in fulfilling that promise. That's the truth of John 3:16.

IV.

But what happens with people who do not believe? This is the third point Jesus made to Nicodemus, and it's the frightening dark side of the otherwise joyous message of light in the Gospel. Jesus said that although he did not come to condemn the world, but to save it, nevertheless all who do not believe are condemned by their own failure to accept him.

And talking about judgment and condemnation is not fashionable in some churches. It might be like hearing me scrape my fingernails across the blackboard. And it probably isn't something we would mention if we were inviting someone to a church function. As Christians we want to feel good. We want to believe that God loves us, and that our salvation will be found in his love.

Well, that's true, as far as it goes. God's relationship with us truly is grounded in love. Because God loves us he sent his Son to offer salvation. But what if that offer is not accepted? What if it is disregarded, or put off until another day? Jesus also made clear in today's reading that those who do not come into the light he offers are condemning themselves by their unbelief.

And he made this point later in John's Gospel on his final trip to Jerusalem. He said "I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. [But] those who reject me and do not receive my sayings have a judge; the word that I have spoken will be their judge on the last day." (12:46, 48).

So, we can be comforted by the reality that God's purpose is love and salvation, not judgment and condemnation. Even so, there are eternal consequences for rejecting God's love as he has given it to us through Jesus Christ.

And those who have heard the Word are called to act while it still is possible. There is no assurance of a second chance. It will not be like the fellow who received a letter from the government advising that because of his death his social security benefits would terminate. The letter then said that the decision would be reconsidered if his circumstances changed.

Salvation, however, does not work that way. Our eternal circumstances, once the time comes, don't change. Jesus' words do not allow for reconsideration. And God knows what is in our hearts. If we have faith he knows it, even if it might be known to him alone.

V.

So, where do we find ourselves? Is it in the confusion of Nicodemus, or do we have a better understanding of what Jesus meant? I pray that we accept Jesus' words as he intended, and have committed ourselves to him.

But if anyone has questions, do not let them rest. Come visit with me. Read scripture again. Talk with friends in church. Pray, by yourself or with others. Nicodemus had an excuse. When he met with Jesus the New Testament had not even been written. Jesus was still alive. The crucifixion and resurrection were in the future.

And that was part of Nicodemus' problem. He was not able to see how it all fit together. The big picture had not yet been painted. We, however, know better. We have over two thousand years of knowledge, tradition, and guidance not available to Nicodemus.

And while many things in the Christian faith are mysteries or cannot be explained in rational terms, today's story of salvation is clear. We might not know the details of what the next world will be like, but we do know what has to happen in this world for us to get there. *Amen.*