

1. Today we need to begin by reaching far back into the history of God's people, the Israelites.

Back to the time of their wilderness wandering. God has done a miraculous thing in setting the Israelites free from their slavery in Egypt, but the Israelites' gratitude for God's grace and deliverance doesn't last long.

They have barely gotten sand between their toes on their wilderness journey before they start to whine and complain.

- *They complain about the water.*
- *They complain about the food.*
- *They complain about their leaders.*
- *They complain about the heat.*
- *They complain because the journey is long and hard.*

One day the Israelites are feeling particularly bad-tempered, and they just go too far. They speak against God and Moses, saying,

"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There's no water here, and the food is terrible. Life was better back in Egypt."

And that, the story tells us, is the straw that breaks the camel's back.

God has had it. God's wrath is unleashed, and God sends poisonous snakes into the camp of the Israelites. There are snakes everywhere; in their tents, in their swags, in their bread baskets and in their water jars.

And those who are bitten by the snakes die a rather horrible death.

So the Israelites who had, just moments before, complained against Moses, now do a 180 degree about-face and beg him to pray to the Lord on their behalf and take away the serpents.

And Moses does. He falls to his knees and prays to the Lord, but the Lord doesn't take away the snakes. Instead, God instructs Moses to fashion a snake from bronze, lift it up on a pole and tell the people to look up and be saved. And everyone who has been bitten by a snake and looks up is saved just as God said.

2. Now, let's fast forward a bit to today's story from John, where a Pharisee named Nicodemus pays Jesus a visit in the night. This little detail, a night-time visit, is important because, in John's Gospel, light is all about belief and faith and darkness is all about unbelief.

John is letting us know from the start that Nicodemus is a man struggling to believe. It's as if Nicodemus is a man who knows he needs help with something, but he doesn't know what, or how to get it. But he knows *where* doesn't he? He's come to Jesus. In the past he had always looked to his own resources. He had spent his whole life thinking that living a good life was the way to God and heaven. He followed the rules to the letter – and probably thought he was a pretty good Jew. But then Jesus started preaching and ministering in the area.

His ministry is affecting people in amazing ways.

Had Nicodemus noticed something fuller than a rulebook and something bigger than himself?

3. When we're following the rules we call ourselves "good people."

When we're not following them, then usually the rules are unfair or wrong but

we're still "good people" aren't we?

Does God love us more than the people we label bad or unlovable? Does he love Pharisees like Nicodemus? What about if we're well liked or respected in the community – does he love us more then? Does he love people more if they're involved in the church or if they have a good Lutheran surname? God loves people regardless of status, popularity, income, genealogy and reputation.

God loved the whining Israelites in the wilderness and he loves the people who think they're the best thing since sliced bread. God loves people who think they don't need anything from God – until something bad happens or they hit hard times.

What if I asked you today what **your** greatest need was – I wonder how you'd answer?

The readings for today are like flashing neon signs that read,

"You all need help (and that includes your pastor!) – and even though you're not the good people you claim to be sometimes - here I am to help you because I love you!"

We all have deep needs. If we strip away the petty problems and the superficial issues that bring you stress – the bad drivers and the recurring home repairs, the computer that's crashed again and even financial stuff that can be annoying. I'm asking you to think about the big issues in your life...

- *Like death*
- *Like your relationship with the God who will one day serve as your eternal Judge*
- *Like making it through this evil world with your faith still in tact*
- *Like giving your children or loved ones a lasting legacy that is more important and valuable than money.*

4. Where does help like that come from?

For the Israelites' in the wilderness it came from a bronze snake on a pole – which if I'm honest I find quite a strange event!

Even though they were whining endlessly and ungrateful – God, who sent the snakes, also sent the help!

He sent help to deeply flawed people. And he did it on account of His burning and holy love – so that all who looked to the bronze serpent on the pole would be saved.

It's a very strange event. Nicodemus found Jesus' response to him strange too. He couldn't quite grasp what Jesus was trying to tell him about entering the Kingdom of God.

⁵ **Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'... ⁹ "How can this be?"**

Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ **"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"**

[Nicodemus was supposed to be a person who knew his scriptures – like a lecturer from any reputable bible college or someone who has searched the scriptures for years]

¹¹ **Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what**

we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

Lutherans know about being born again don't they? When we hear "water and the Spirit" we've been trained to think of what? Baptism! In the SC the question is posed – **How can water do such great things?** How are people born again through water and the Spirit into the Kingdom of God? It's the same question Nicodemus asked when he said to Jesus, "How can this be?"

This is how...The answer comes to us saying, "*Certainly not just water [baptism is not an empty ritual or photo op], but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with faith which trusts this word of God in water. For without God's word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit...*"

So I want you to think of faith when you think baptism.

Baptism and faith in Jesus go hand in hand. Let's not separate them. Wouldn't it be a tragedy if we thought of our baptism as past event that has nothing to do with our daily walk with God? Baptism, living in the Kingdom of God and your faith are everyday events. They matter every day of your life.

Baptismal faith is faith that looks to Jesus every day – not just when it's convenient, or when we need something from God and not only on Sunday. It looks to Jesus 7 days a week.

5. The only reason any of this is possible for us is because the Son of Man [Jesus Christ] was lifted up – as Jesus told Nicodemus.

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

Jesus Christ, lifted up on the cross to die for you - so that the poison of sin doesn't destroy you. Lifted up on the cross so that you can look to Jesus in all things and every aspect of your life and be saved through him.

The Son of Man was lifted up on the cross to die and then to rise again so we could receive new birth through water and the Spirit.

That new birth that Nicodemus couldn't quite 'get' happens as we are joined to Jesus. Joined to Him in his death and resurrection through baptism and faith in Jesus.

Remember baptism and faith always go together.

That's how you enter the kingdom of God. It's not possible without the Son of Man [Jesus Christ] being lifted up on the cross.

This is where our help comes from – the maker of heaven and earth!

Why did God do it? ¹⁶ ***For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him [not a one-time event, but any person who continues to look to Jesus and believe in Him] shall not perish***

but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

God did it because He is a saving and rescuing God. He's been in the saving and rescue business since the beginning of human history.

He's not concerned with things like outward appearances, income or education levels. He's not concerned with skin color or the kind of house you live in. **People sometimes love for these reasons, but not God.**

God's love is much deeper and moves into action to help us where and when we need it most. God didn't send His Son because we are good people.

He did it because we're not. He did it because we all need the kind of help that is beyond our reach. Just like the Israelites couldn't heal themselves from the deadly snakebites they suffered, we don't have the antidote for our own sin.

God does and it requires an act of God – His Son lifted up on the cross for you and me.

God looks at you today, not you by worldly definitions, but the person He created you to be. And He loves you with a love beyond human reason put into action in sending Jesus to die for you – to be lifted up high on the cross that you might look to Him in all things and live.

Being born into the Kingdom of God is about real life, a full life. It's about living in your baptismal faith and daily looking up to where your help comes from - to Jesus - lifted up so you can live and walk in His love every day of your life. Amen!