

“The Cure for Snakebite!”
Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:1-17

Rev. Kenneth M. Locke, Pastor/Head of Staff
March 5, 2023; 9:00 a.m.
Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

“The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation.” The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation. That’s from Henry David Thoreau. You probably ran into him in High School in an American History or American Literature course. He’s most famous for living two years in a small house next to Walden Pond. He wrote a book about it which generations of American children have been forced to read. That’s where the line comes from. “The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation.” The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation.

I don’t know if that’s true or not. I’m sure lots of people are fairly content most of the time. But I do know everyone, at one point or another, wonders, “Is this it? Is this all there is to life?” Even if our life is wonderful, we still wonder. Even if we have meaningful work and someone who loves us and we love back, still. Is this it? Is this the most I’m going to get from life?

When that time comes, and it comes to all of us sooner or later, we can do a couple of things. We can sink into a deep pit of despair. We can shake it off and try to get on with life. Or we can do something about it. Preferably, something good.

Nicodemus comes to see Jesus, at night. Remember – we read John like poetry: lots of imagery, lots figures of speech. It’s not that Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark. Nicodemus is in darkness in his mind. He is confused, he doesn’t know what to think. In his darkness, he comes to see the light of the world.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus and says, ‘Teacher, you must be from God. There’s no other way. You have to be from God.’

Jesus responds, ‘If you want to see the Kingdom of God, if you want to be in a right relationship with God now and in the life to come, you must be born ‘anothen’.

Now remember, this is John. In John, people speak past each other all the time and that’s what’s happening here. ‘Anothen’ can

mean 'again', or it can mean 'from above'. Either one. 'Again,' or 'from above'. Either one is possible.

Nicodemus thinks Jesus means 'again'. He's confused. 'Can a grown man fit inside his mother and be born again? Eww. Gross!'

But Jesus doesn't mean that. He means we need to be born from above. We need to be born of the Holy Spirit. Today, we would say we need to be spirit-filled. If we want to see the Kingdom of God, if we want to live in right relationship with God, now and in the life to come, if we really want to live, we need to live spirit-filled lives. We need to live like Jesus.

We need to live like Jesus. We need to live spiritual lives, like Jesus lived. And we need to live like Jesus with the same intensity as those Israelites in the wilderness looked at the snake Moses made.

When we are bitten by that snake of quiet desperation. When we are wandering around lost in the darkness of our lives, wondering whether to dive into that pit of despair, or shake it off and try to make the best of it, there is something we can do.

It's not being 'born again', a one-and-done, one-time event we can mark on the calendar. Not. It's about an ongoing way of living. It's about living as spiritual people. We need to be genuinely spiritual people. We need to live the life of the Spirit, the life of Jesus, with the same intensity those ancient Israelites looked at that snake.

The spiritual life is what we've been talking about all along. It's nothing we haven't heard before. Care for the poor. Look out for the powerless. Be a peacemaker in our community. Live our faith in a way everyone can see. Don't settle for everyday, pedestrian morality. Strive for a higher righteousness. And before we do that thing, that thing we know is a really bad idea, stop and ask ourselves, "Will this please God? Will this please God?"

Maybe most of us don't live lives of quiet desperation. But at some point, everyone gets snake bit. We all have an existential crisis. You do. I do. Our parents and children and the neighbors who act like they have it all together. Everyone asks themselves, Is this all there is? Is this what life's about? Is this it?

When that moment comes, we don't need to be born 'again'. We can't. We need to live like people born from above. We need to

live like spiritual people. People who have the Holy Spirit as close as the air in their lungs. In other words, we need to live like Jesus. We need to live like Jesus.

Not because we have to. We don't have to. God doesn't make us. Of course not. Friend, the good news of God is, *16“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish,”*

Perishing is not God's will. Living without knowing God, living distanced or cut-off from God, is not God's will. Spending our lives wondering, “Is that all there is? Is that all I'm going to get from life?” No. That is not God's will for us. Jesus did not come for us to perish, Jesus came so that we “*may have eternal life.*

17“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, We are not condemned to live lives of constant snakebites, lives of quiet desperation. No. God sent Jesus into the world in order that we may live genuinely spiritual lives, lives ‘born from above,’ lives spent in loving and healthy relationship with God in this world and the next. In other words, Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16-17)

My beloved, this is how much God loves us. Thanks be to God! Amen.