



SERMON TITLE: "The Epic Conversation"
SCRIPTURE: John 3:1-15

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"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his own biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

Being lost—you know that feeling? It's one of the worst experiences, stirring up panic, worry, fear, and a sense of utter hopelessness. A few years ago I was on a backpacking trip with a good friend of mine. We had wanted to do a trip together for quite some time but always found ourselves too busy. So we landed on late December to go as we were both out of school for winter break and figured the trails would be less crowded. We had a nice route planned out and a mildly difficult distance to cover over five days. However, due to a series of events and a domino effect of one bad thing leading to a worse thing, by day five we found ourselves completely and despairingly lost in the woods, far off the trail, desperately looking for something for our eyes to land on that would give us a sense of direction or bearing.

And that's really what we do when we're lost, isn't it? We look around. Our eyes scan, sometimes wildly looking for a familiar object, sign, landmark...anything to give us the slightest relief in the panic and hope towards rescue. Whether it's in a foreign city or the woods, or even if it's an object you've lost around your house, the first instinct is often to look. And that was me, in those woods with my friend, looking. Trying to read the terrain or topography. Attempting to find an abandoned logging road or trail blaze. I would have taken anything to feel like we were close to help. When we're lost, we look.

The beginning of the third chapter of John really is one of the most epic conversations we have access to in the Scriptures. It's a rare setting, at least in the Gospels, because there aren't too many private conversations with Jesus (the crowds were always pressing in on him). But here, the noise is reduced and we get to be flies on the wall of an incredibly important conversation between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. Let's attempt to approach it with fresh ears.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee which means he belonged to an order of religious elite in Israel that really didn't like Jesus all that much. He breaks too many of their rules and expectations and seems to operate out of an authority they simply don't understand. Nicodemus, however, is curious about Jesus and comes to him at night, probably in an attempt to keep this conversation secret under the cover of darkness. He begins the conversation with praise towards Jesus and honestly at this point in the narrative we don't know how genuine his acclaim is. Jesus responds to him by answering a question that hasn't even been asked. "You must be born again to see the Kingdom of God." Nicodemus is baffled and shocked at this statement as he interprets it quite literally leading Jesus to explain that in this life there is an initial and earthly birth of water, but a heavenly birth of Spirit. The first birth grants access to this world, the second birth to the spiritual. And then Jesus reveals some mysterious element to this conversation by talking about the wind. At first glance, this might seem confusing, but Jesus is talking to a religious leader who would have been steeped in Old Testament Scriptures and themes. The Hebrew word for "wind" and "Spirit" is one and the same. Jesus isn't talking about the weather here, he's talking about the Spirit of God, confirmed by the last part of verse 8.

So what is Jesus saying? In summary, I think a paraphrase would go something like this: "The Spirit is moving, Nicodemus, and he's not as predictable as you think. You can feel His comings and goings, but you cannot see him. There is another realm, a spiritual realm. It is called the Kingdom of God. For a man to enter that realm he must be born twice: first of water and then of Spirit."

Nicodemus is really perplexed by now and I think Jesus, having much grace on him, now begins to speak his language. Jesus uses an Old Testament story referring to Moses lifting up the serpent to help communicate his point. In Numbers 21:4-8 there is a story about the Hebrew people as they are traveling through the wilderness with Moses. They begin to complain and grumble against God even in the midst of the enormous blessings, rescue, and providence he has shown them (not to mention one of the most condensed display of miraculous power anywhere in the Bible). So God allows venomous snakes to come among the people in the wilderness and all through their camp. If you were bitten by one of these snakes, you would surely die. God did this as a way to grab the attention of the people and call them back once again to repentance and faithfulness. However, God's wrath is partnered with God's grace and so it is here.

God instructs Moses to erect a statue of a bronze serpent so that if anyone is bitten by one of these snakes they can look at the statue and they will be healed. How interesting! The statue could have taken the image of anything and yet the very thing that healed the people was the image of the very thing that was killing them. Think about how big the Hebrew people would have been. This is no small camp. It is a nomadic group that would span over a great area. I have a hunch that no matter where you went or how far you traveled out, you would develop a sense of orientation towards the bronze statue just in case you were bitten, like an invisible line that tethers you to the only hope of healing.

Now jump back to John 3:14-15. Jesus tells Nicodemus that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, he will be lifted up that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. Again, here is the paraphrase: "Nicodemus I will be lifted up (alluding to the cross). There is something deadly among the people and there is only one hope for healing. I will take on the very thing that is killing you and become that image itself so that all who look to me in faith will be healed."

Jesus who knew no sin became sin. When we realize that we have been bitten by the sting of sin and death there is only one hope to look to for healing and it is Jesus. Similar to the Hebrews who would have had an internal compass directed towards the serpent statue I believe we ought to have our daily lives oriented around Jesus, going nowhere without our hearts postured towards him.

Are you lost in the wilderness with that sense of wandering and hopelessness? Similar to my experience in the woods, desperate for my eyes to land on some sense of hope, Jesus tells us that when we realize we are far from home, defeated by sin, there is an anchor point for our eyes (and heart). It is Jesus himself, taking on our sins, and offering our souls healing and rescue.

FOR DISCUSSION:

- What is something that stuck out to you from the message this morning?
- Has there ever been a time in your life when you were genuinely lost? How were you rescued?
- Can you think of a time in your life when you weren't sure what God was doing or where he was, but now in hindsight, you can see how the Spirit was moving and leading you to a better hope?
- The phrase "born again" has become very familiar with our ears, but what does Jesus mean by that? How would our faith be defined differently if we began to apply his words with a fresh perspective?
- Have you ever connected the story from Numbers before? What from that reference helped connect the dots of the Gospel?
- In our own lives, do we have a sense of orientation around Jesus understanding that he is the source of hope and healing?
- Have you ever been so aware of your plight and sin that with all desperation and hope you have looked to Jesus for rescue? Do you believe this is a one-time event or daily discipline?
- Are there any rhythms or patterns in your heart and life that need to change after hearing this Scripture?