

Sermon: *Behold the Lamb*
Text: *John 3:14 – 21*
Date: *March 22, 2009 AM*
Place: *Jesup First UMC*

On the top of the city water tower in Wilmore, Kentucky, there is an interesting monument. There, sticking 100 feet into the air is a lighted cross. Now, that cross is important – not only for students at Asbury College and Seminar, but – for the entire community, because it is an orienting monument. You can just how far you are from home, by looking for the cross.

In these past few weeks, as we've journeyed through Lent, we've learned the centrality of the cross. We are people of the cross; it is the very focus of our existence. We've learned to be cross-eyed, to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. And we've learned that Jesus' orientation toward the cross gave Him the courage to challenge Israel's religiosity in trivializing the faith and marginalizing the Gentiles. But we're not through looking at the cross just yet.

In our text this morning, Jesus is having a conversation with Nicodemus and He said: "*You must be born again.*" Now, here is a respected leader of Israel, a moral man, a spiritual leader, and yet, Jesus tells him: "*You must be born again.*" And Nicodemus answered with the same question that you and I might ask: "*How can this be?*" In other words, "*How does this new birth happen?*" So, Jesus explains it to Nicodemus and in the process gives Nicodemus three things about this new salvation.

First, we need to notice the necessity of salvation! Verse 17 says: "*For God did not send His*

Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Jesus is very clear in these verses that the world is under condemnation. Now, in Georgia, we know a lot about condemnation. Historically, we have condemned the guilty to death and we've put them in the state prison on death row and that's where they sit until the sentence can be carried out.

And that's what Jesus is describing in these verses. The whole world is under condemnation that sin brings, waiting for the final sentence to be carried out. In Romans 1, Paul describes it this way: **"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness."** But Jesus came, not as proof of God's condemnation but as an offer of God's salvation. Jesus said: **"The Son of Man didn't come to condemn the world but so that the world might be saved through Him."**

In fact, later in the book of Romans, Paul would say: **"There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."** Those who are not in Christ are condemned and waiting for their sentence to be carried out. Jesus said: **"And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the light."**

The cross becomes the symbol of the necessity of our salvation.

Second, our salvation depends on a new orientation toward the cross. Jesus said: **“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”**

As the people of Israel were wandering through the wilderness, they began to murmur against God and Moses. And the Bible says, **“God sent fiery serpents into the camp and many people died.”** So the people came to Moses and repented and they asked Moses to intercede for them to the Lord. So, God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and to put it up on a pole and if anyone was bitten by a snake, if they would look up at the bronze serpent, they would be healed. And that’s what happened! The snakes continued to bite people and those who looked up at the bronze serpent lived and those who did not, died.

Now, as a rabbi, Nicodemus understood this story. He understood the seriousness of sin and its consequences. And he understood the rabbinic teaching of the day said that looking upon that serpent was an act of faith and that it was really faith that saved the people’s lives. And now, Jesus is saying the same is true of our spiritual sickness. Everyone has been bitten by sin and everyone is dying, but when the Son of Man is lifted upon on the cross, if they will only look upon Him in faith, they will be saved. It’s a matter of faith. Paul said it this way: **“But if you will confess with your mouth ... and believe in your heart, you will be saved.”**

When Charles looked out of his house and saw the snow piled high, he knew he couldn't get to his church that Sunday. So, he made his way down to the little Methodist Church near his home. Well, the pastor was out of town that day and a layspeaker was filling the pulpit. His text was Isaiah 45: "Look to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth." Now, Charles was miserable; he had been under conviction because he didn't know if he was saved or not. And then, Charles heard the preacher say: "A man need not go to college to learn to look. Anyone can look, even a child." And that's how Charles Spurgeon, England's greatest preacher, became a Christian.

It takes a new orientation toward the cross.

Third, our salvation is grounded in the love of God. Jesus said: "For God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Here, in the most well-known verse in the whole bible, is a description of the motivation behind the cross. The cross is not a mistake. The cross is not only a place of Roman punishment. The cross has become the ultimate display of God's love. And it's not just a love for good people; it's a love for sinners. It's not just a love for Jews; it's a love for Gentiles too. It's not just a love for the rich and powerful; it's a love for the poor and the marginalized too. "For God so loved the world."

Now, like most Jews of his day, Nicodemus would have found this love a little shocking. I mean, Jonah had to learn that God's love was big enough to include

the Ninevites as well as the Israelites. Even James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven upon a village in Samaria for rejecting the Word of God. Surely, God's love couldn't include the Samaritans. And even after the resurrection, Peter and James wanted to exclude the Gentiles from the church. It took God's vision and Paul's persistence to persuade them that God's love was big enough to include the Gentiles too.

Praise God! His love is big enough to include me and you. God loved us so much that He gave His only begotten Son. And so, our love must be ever expanding to include those that the rest of the world would exclude.

The cross becomes a symbol of the motivation behind our salvation ... the love of God.

And so it is that the season of Lent invites us to live our lives with a new focus, a cross-eyed focus; to deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Christ; to make sure that God's Temple – our lives – are holy examples of God's grace.

It's the cross – the cross of Christ that changes everything. It is the symbol of my need for salvation. It is the symbol of God's love for me. And it is a symbol of my faith in God. You see ...

Alas! And did my savior bleed and did my sovereign die. Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I. At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light and the burden of my heart rolled away. It was there by faith, I received my sight and now I am happy all the day.

Prayer and Altar Call