

THE MESSAGE for March 20, 2011

John 3:1-17

Lead us... Speaking the Unspeakable

The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

In 1817, when this congregation was five-years-old, Benjamin Franklin said, “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” I would add that even death has been called into question. As Ben Franklin points out - life in this world is uncertain.

What would you add to this list?

- Gas prices
- Stock market
- Global warming
- Japan’s Earthquake and Tsunami and the fall out of their Nuclear Meltdown
- Political unrest in key countries
- Our military involvement in Libya as of yesterday
- And the list goes on.

Ben Franklin was right - life is uncertain in this world.

An Old Testament Story of Uncertainty

God’s people were set free from slavery after 430 years – generation after generation after generation were stuck in slavery (Exodus 12:40-41). Slavery was all they knew. Life became the same old dull routine. They knew how to be slaves and nothing else. God chose Moses to lead God’s people out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. On the way life became uncertain.

Their gratitude for God’s grace and generosity flowing into their lives didn’t last very long. They barely got out of Egypt a week into their 40 year journey – barely out of the sweat shops and mud pits – before they start to whine and complain. Kind of like kids in the car five minutes down the road, “Are we there yet?” Oh it’s going to be a long trip.

The people of God complained. They complained about the water. They complained about the food. They complained about their leader. They complained about the heat. They complained about the journey being long and hard. One day the people went too far with their complaining (Number 21:4-9). They complained against God and against God’s chosen leader, Moses. “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 so much better back in Egypt. Come on?!?!?” Can you hear them?

Question: How could they possibly think that slavery was better than freedom?
 Answer: Because freedom is so uncertain.

On the road of uncertainty - trust and obedience to God become the map and compass to follow. Trust and obedience are crucial especially when life is so uncertain.

The people didn't trust God and they weren't obedient to God's leader. They complained, and complained, and complained, until God had had it. God sent poisonous snakes into the camp of the Israelites. There were snakes everywhere; in their tents, in their sleeping bags, in their food baskets, in their water jars - everywhere. And anyone who was bitten by the snakes died a terrible, horrible, no good death.

The people realized what they had done. They had sinned against God with their complaining, with their lack of trust and obedience. There are consequences to sin. So they begged Moses, they put their trust and obedience in him (as they should have done in the first place). And Moses prays to God to take away the snakes. Moses did. But God didn't.

God didn't take away the snakes. Instead, God instructed Moses to fashion a snake out of bronze, lift it up on a pole (a snake on a stick) and tell the people to look up and be saved. Everyone bitten by a snake would look up and be saved.

Uncertain became certain.
 Death became life.
 Complaining became commitment.

A New Testament Story of Uncertainty

A Pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus one night under the cover of darkness. In John's Gospel, light symbolizes belief and certainty -- darkness symbolizes unbelief and uncertainty. Nicodemus is uncertain. He is in the dark literally and figuratively. He's looking for something but he is uncertain what it is. Jesus knows.

Jesus knows that Nicodemus is looking for life, real life, a meaningful, purpose-filled life. The kind of life lived in the light. The kind of life that fires up passion, sparks imagination, connects more deeply with God and others. That's the kind of life that Jesus brings, but Nicodemus is having trouble seeing it. He's in the dark.

Question: do you sense there is more to life than what you are experiencing right now? Is life uncertain for you?

Nicodemus is uncertain and looking for answers. His habits, his job, his traditions, his power, his stuff, his religion weren't giving him the kind of life he longed to have. He was one of 70 Pharisees (religious leaders) who had the religious authority for every Jewish person throughout the world at that time. He was a spokesperson for God on all matters of life - religiously. He was someone people looked up to for advice on life. He was religious but not spiritual. On the outside he had it all. On the inside he was uncertain. Outwardly he lacked nothing. Inwardly he was uncertain.

Notice how Jesus gets right to the point, saying. “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again.” Jesus is saying that, to live a real life, a life in the Spirit, one must be born spiritually. Of course, Nicodemus doesn’t get it. He takes Jesus literally and wonders how he can possibly be born from the womb a second time. Jesus tells Nicodemus “you must be born again” which could also be translated as “born anew” or “born from above.” Nicodemus is focused on entering the womb. Jesus is focused on entering the Kingdom of God.

I’m sure most of us have been asked the question, “Are you born again?” The question implies that we chose something, that we decide something, or that we cause something to happen.

My physical birth was not my decision. It was not my choice. It was not something I caused to happen. I had no say in the matter and I had nothing to do with my birth. And neither did you - with your birth that is. Life is not a decision; it’s a gift of grace and love beyond our human understanding.

Likewise, the spiritual birth Jesus is talking about is also not my decision, or choice or something I cause to happen. And neither is yours. It too is a gift of grace and love beyond our human understanding.

Jesus says it’s like the wind. The wind blows this way and that way but we don’t know where it comes from or where it goes. This new birth, this spiritual birth is the work of the Spirit blowing into our lives. It just happens. One day we somehow, mysteriously, just know and feel that we are loved by God eternally and it changes everything. It changes our perspective on life and we grow into that new relationship.

Jesus tells Nicodemus about his ancestors, the wilderness wandering, and the whining, and the poisonous snakes, and the bronze serpent.

Listen again to his words:

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Nicodemus could not know, but we do, we know Jesus is talking about himself. Just as Moses lifts up the bronze serpent and all who looked up to it and be saved, so too Jesus would be lifted up on a cross so that all who look up to him will be saved.

In other words, if we are looking for real life, we must look up to Jesus. Nothing else and no one else will do. By looking up to Jesus we can be saved from the serpents of sin in our lives.

You've probably been asked the question – “Are you saved?” It's the sister question of “Are you born again?” I answer that question by saying, “Yes! I was saved the day Jesus died on the cross.”

With Jesus...

Uncertain becomes certain.

Death becomes life.

Complaining becomes commitment.

Like Nicodemus we can stop looking for life in all the wrong places. And be open to the life Jesus offers. Life with Jesus is certain life, real life, a meaningful life. Without Jesus... life is well... really... no life at all.

I leave you with this final thought... Maybe it isn't so much that we need to be born again as it is we need to grow up and live our lives trusting God and being obedient to our leader – Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.