Summary:
Sermon Title: Water and Spirit
Text: John 3:1-17
By: Rev. Terry Carty
Date: 03-20-11
Place: Kingston Springs UMC
Season: Second Sunday in Lent

Main Point: "Born from Above" or "Born anew" means taking up the life that Jesus modeled and living it today.

The Gospel of Matthew since has predominantly guided our worship before Christmas, but today we have begun to travel with the Gospel of John. In John, we learn more about some of the characters who Jesus encountered in his ministry and it gives us a different way of seeing the Christ.

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We jump right into the encounter with Nicodemus, a teacher of Hebrew law and a member of the Jewish religious leadership. Nicodemus is a character who is only named in the Gospel According to John.

If you think that the scripture reading is confusing, think about how it might have seemed to Nicodemus. What might he have said to his wife when he got home from this meeting with Jesus that night? It might have gone like this?

"I don't know, but that was the strangest meeting I ever had. I started out being nice – I was respectful in every way and told him that we [the Jewish leaders] recognize him as a teacher who has come from God. After all, no one could do the things he has done if they were not in the presence of God.

"It immediately started getting strange because Jesus said that 'no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.' At least, that is what I took it to mean. He could have meant 'born from above' but that didn't make sense. I was getting confused, so I asked 'How can anyone be born after they have already grown up? That's physically impossible!

"Then he said he went into to his teacher mode and said something else that was confusing: 'no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.' That is where I lost it, because spirit and wind are the same word – then he started talking about the wind blowing around and you can't see it…I didn't have any idea what he was talking about. Spirit or wind, born again or born from above?

"And he knew I was confused. He said that he was talking about things that he and his followers have experienced, but we, the Jewish leaders, do not believe. I think he meant that HE has already been with God and has descended to be our teacher!

"Since I could not understand all the double talk about being born again or from above, the then said something about Moses in the wilderness – you know, the bronze snake

on the post that kept people from dying when they kept their eyes on it? He said the Son of Man must be lifted up like that so that whoever believes in HIM will have eternal life!"

[wife, caringly] Honey, why don't you drink a glass of milk and then get some sleep.

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Confusing, yes. This whole 'Born Again' conversation that has been so dominant in American culture for the past ½ century has confused many people. Performers and politicians proclaim they are 'born again' and in every televised football game there is a banner saying "John 3:16." TV evangelists throw out 'born again' as a challenge and non-Christians use it as a joke. Among Christians, it has become a passcode to identify who is on the evangelical conservative team and who is on the theologically liberal team.

Enough already! This passage in John is the only place that the 'Born Again' formula for salvation is used. And as Nicodemus pointed out to his wife in my pretend monologue, the Greek word for 'born anew' is the same word as 'born from above.'

The real key to understanding this passage comes from the brief mention of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness, an image that Nicodemus or the early Christian community would have understood immediately. "Focus yourself on what God has sent you and you will not die."

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that it is no longer about a bronze snake – now God has sent his only Son so that whoever believes in HIM will have the life that God has intended for people to have - eternally. With this image, Nicodemus finally got it.

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Do you see why this passage is key to our Lenten journey? Not only was Jesus to be lifted up figuratively, but Jesus would be lifted up on a high post literally. Christ on the Cross is a visual image that the Gospel of John intends to be as meaningful for us as the bronze serpent was for Nicodemus.

Keeping our eyes turned to Jesus means far more than just looking at his broken body raised up on a pole. It means taking up the life that Jesus modeled and living it today. It means studying the scriptures daily, living a prayerful life, contemplating God's will, observing the practices of faith, and seeking God's grace wherever we can find it.

Today, we come to the table of Christ with our hands outreached seeking God's grace and our eyes lifted up to Christ seeking to live the eternal life he offers. May we go from this place today with our eyes still lifted up to Christ so that from this day on into eternity our lives are spent living, not dying.