

Lent 2, 2007  
Good Hope Lutheran Church  
John 3: 3

From the Gospel of John, chapter 3.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, You must be born again. What is born of flesh is merely flesh, but what is born of spirit, is spirit. TO see the Kingdom of God you must be born of spirit. To see the Kingdom of God, you must be born again.

In the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.

Today I'd like to ask you, to just take a few moments, and think about Smokey the Bear.

Smokey Bear, and maybe Woodsy Owl or, McGruff the Crime Dog. These cartoonish characters have all been a part of what are known as Public Service Campaigns. Public Service Campaigns, take Smokey Bear for instance. There he is, in his little forest ranger uniform, looking sad and forlorn and telling everyone out there in TV land, Only you. Only you, can prevent forest fires. Why, if you go camping in the woods and you are not careful with that little fire you build, you might end up burning down Idaho for heaven's sake, can't let that happen, right? Only you, can make sure it doesn't. Only you, can prevent forest fires.

Likewise Woodsy Owl and McGruff the Crime Dog. Woodsy Owl—Give a hoot, don't pollute. Clever, huh. McGruff the Crime Dog—Only you can, take a bite out of crime. These are Public Service Campaigns, good hearted attempts to improve life by changing one little piece of behavior. Change this one little thing, they say—be more observant of your campfire, be more observant of your neighborhood—change this one little thing, and life will get better. You'll protect Idaho, you'll improve your own neighborhood, change this one little thing. And life will be fine.

And to the list of Public Service Campaigns we can add Stop Drop and Roll; Just Say No to Drugs; and many others too. Now I don't have any real gripe with any of this. It's not Satanic, Smokey Bear is not the devil in disguise, these campaigns are fine but. But. I want you to notice the assumptions these campaigns are built on.

Assumption #1: People are basically kind decent and good. And if there are problems in this

world, like pollution or forest fires, it's simply because kind decent and good people are just being a little careless, that's all. It's not really a moral problem, it's simply an attention span problem, people really don't need to change inside they just need to change a few little things on the outside. Be a bit more careful, be a bit more observant, that's all. Assumption #1, people are kind decent and good, and with only a few superficial changes everything will work out just fine.

Assumption #2, is very similar. Assumption #2 says, if you only knew better, you'd do better. If only you knew there was a better way you'd follow that better way, again, it's assumed that people are basically good. So if they're behaving badly it's only because they don't know any better. It's not a matter of morality, it's not a matter of spiritual conflict, it's not a matter of the heart. It's simply a matter of education. Show people the better way, and they'll follow the better way.

Well those are the two assumptions behind Public Service Campaigns, and they are very comforting somehow, in a way they are very re-assuring. But what if they're wrong. What if they're wrong, what if people knew perfectly well that forest fires start from moments of carelessness, and they choose to be careless anyway? What if people knew the dangers of drug abuse, but instead of just saying No they decided it would be more fun to say Yes? What if the problem was a little bit deeper than attention span, or lack of information; what if the problem went straight to the heart. What if people really were *not* kind and decent and good, but instead at the very core of their being what if people were in bondage to sin. What if. What if we can't be taught. What if we can only be saved. Public Service Campaigns do some good, I'm sure, and I'd like to think that they've helped somebody somewhere, but the fact is—these campaigns do not take into account, the reality of human sin. We are not simply good decent people who happen to be careless at times. We are sinners, people who know perfectly well what is right and good but can't be bothered to do it. We are people whose every thought and word and deed tends toward the selfish, and the self-serving, we are people who really cannot change anything significant on

the outside. Unless and until we have been changed, on the inside.

Which is why when Almighty God wanted to rescue this world, He did not send a Public Service Campaign. He did not send a mascot. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. And it's why in the Gospel lesson today, Jesus didn't tell Nicodemus, Change this one little thing on the outside and you'll be ok! Drop this one pesky little sin lose this one annoying little habit, and you're fine!—Jesus didn't say that. Instead Jesus said to Nicodemus, You must be born again. Nicodemus, said Jesus, it's your whole life that's heading the wrong direction. It's your whole life that needs to be changed. Not simply a piece of behavior here or there, but the whole thing—you must be born again. In the name and by the power of God's own Spirit, you have to be given a whole new life, and it's got to begin now. You can't simply be taught, you have to be saved, and it's not just a few details it's your self completely! Nicodemus, said the Lord. You must be born again.

And that's the message of the Gospel. Not a Public Service Campaign, but the cross and empty tomb, and the outpouring of His Holy Spirit on all those who call upon His name. Sound good? Friends, I hope so. But you know what? I think we'd probably prefer the Public Service Campaign. Given a choice between Smokey Bear and Jesus Christ, we'd take Smokey Bear any day, why? Cause it's easier. It's easier, it's less work and it's more re-assuring somehow. It's more comforting to think of ourselves as nice people with a few sloppy habits, than it is to see ourselves the way God sees us—sinners, in need of complete and total change. Sinners, for whom nothing less than death and resurrection will do. The way of Jesus Christ is harder by far, it may not sound as pleasant as Smokey Bear. The way of Christ is harder, but it is the way of salvation. To see the Kingdom of God, there is no other way.

Good news. Good news, Jesus died and rose again. Death and resurrection is what He did for us, and for our salvation. Christ's gift to you is new life, now and forever. And to receive this new life. As with Nicodemus then so with you today, to receive this new life—all you have to do is let go of the old one. Changes in behavior there must be, change on the outside there will be—but

first the one on the inside, lay down your life. Leave it at the foot of the cross. And in the name and by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, be born again.

May this be the day, in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.