

**Sunday, March 5, 2023**  
**Second Sunday in Lent (Year A)**

John 3.1-17

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/113902968306833>

*(Sermon begins at about 13:00)*

**“Unlikely Guide”**

As we begin the second week of our Lenten journey, we encounter an unlikely guide on that journey. Nicodemus. A Pharisee and a member of the temple leadership. The very group that has been critical of Jesus and his actions. The very group that Jesus has himself criticized and even accused of hypocrisy. But what is even more astonishing, what makes this visit even more unusual, is the fact that Nicodemus is not your run-of-the-mill rabbi, but a member of the Sanhedrin, the elite assembly of religious leaders that, among other duties, served as the Jewish equivalent of the Supreme Court. Given this, it's no wonder that Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of night. Particularly when you consider that this visit occurred on the heels of Jesus' disturbance of the peace, overturning the tables of the money changes and driving out of the temple the animals to be sold for sacrifices.

Based on this clandestine visit and the exchange that ensues between Nicodemus and Jesus, it is obvious that Nicodemus is intrigued by Jesus and his message. Perhaps being prompted to seek out Jesus because of what had happened at the temple. Such an act of willful disturbance on the hallowed ground of the temple indicating an authentic zeal for what Jesus believes. An act that seemed to be enough to prompt Nicodemus to try to find out more about this Jesus and what he was proclaiming.

Reading between the lines, Nicodemus is not only concerned for his status and reputation at the prospect of being seen with Jesus—hence the nighttime visit. He is also a bit unsure. He appears to be caught between the official party line of both the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin and his curiosity and growing sense that there is something about Jesus that cannot be ignored. That there is a truth that maybe, just maybe, transcends what he thought he knew and believed. He is obviously a bit tenuous. A bit uncertain. But he at least has the courage to explore. He appears to be open to possibilities. Even if remaining in the shadows. At least for the time being.

And this is precisely what Jesus offers Nicodemus. Possibilities. Diving right into the deep end of the theological pool: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Of course, Nicodemus, given his training in legal matters, is taking Jesus' words very literally. He questions the premise of being able to be born anew—for the words that Jesus use can mean to be born from above or born anew. Since being born from above makes no sense to him, he opts for the more literal being born anew. Jesus is happy to engage in the nuanced conversation and seeks to help Nicodemus understand that he is talking about a new life in the Spirit. A concept a bit foreign to this old-school Jewish rabbi. Intrigued, Nicodemus wants to know “How can this be?” To which Jesus responds, “Just as Moses lifted

up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, and whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” There is a lot in this one statement. A lot!

To help Nicodemus understand, Jesus uses an image from the Hebrew Scriptures. Specifically, an incident that occurred when the Hebrews were on their forty-year wilderness journey as recorded in the Book of Numbers. The people had become rebellious and were complaining against God and Moses, who, they claimed, had led them out into the wilderness to die. They complained that they had nothing to eat, despite the fact that God provided them with manna. As punishment for their sinfulness, God sent poisonous snakes among the people—a visual representation of the destructiveness of their sinful and rebellious behavior. Once the people get the message, they confess and beg for forgiveness. God then commands Moses to make a bronze serpent and to lift it up so that those bitten by the snakes could look upon it and be healed. A visual representation of God’s forgiveness. Thus was the last time the people rebelled *en masse*. The people got the message: God is the source of healing and wholeness.

The other part of Jesus’ statement, the point he is specifically trying to make to Nicodemus, is that Jesus, as the Son of Man, is similar to the bronze serpent, one who is to be lifted up. An image foreshadowing Jesus being lifted up on the cross—of his crucifixion. Lifted up also alluding to what will follow the crucifixion: Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. And that it will be through him being lifted up—through his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension—that forgiveness, health and wholeness, and new life will be brought to the people. In short, new life from above. Jesus making the comparison that just as the Hebrews were forgiven for their sinfulness by looking upon a bronze serpent that had been lifted up, humanity would receive forgiveness and so much more, through the one who would be lifted up on the cross.

To put a period—or rather, an exclamation point—on it, Jesus then says what is undeniably the most well-known Scripture passage: “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.” So well-known that even the citation—John 3.16—is sufficient to convey the meaning of that verse. The definitive statement of the extent of God’s love. Although, truth be told, Jesus was not talking about how much God loves the world. He was actually seeking to convey to Nicodemus the process by which God shows his love to the world and to humanity. To express the way in which God demonstrates his love. So, the more accurate translation of Jesus’ original words would actually be “For God loved the world in this way: that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

While a beautiful statement of both the extent of God’s love and how God seeks to show that love for the world, viewed in isolation, it can be taken out of context and not convey the full extent of what Jesus intended. Some take this statement, particularly the part about “everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” as meaning that only those who believe in him will have eternal life. That only those who believe in him are saved. That, by extension, those who do not believe in Jesus as the Son of God are excluded. Setting up the implication of judgment, of condemnation. Which is not what Jesus was talking about, at all. Which was not what Jesus was about, at all.

The key is in the next verse, John 3.17: “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.” The addition of this verse really puts an exclamation point on Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus. That Jesus is not about judgment and condemnation, but is about welcome and inclusivity. That God sent Jesus so that all the world might be saved, not just some of us.

The whole intent of Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus is to clarify just what it is that Jesus is about. Jesus does that through a trip through salvation history, from the Hebrews in the wilderness, to an anticipation of his death and resurrection, and on to the future to include all of humanity for all time. As one commentator so eloquently summarizes Jesus’ revelation in the encounter with Nicodemus: “God graciously delivers us from the self-destruction of sin, and God faithfully, astonishingly gives God’s only Child for the sake of our deliverance, such that we can ‘look at’ Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection in ways that help us heal and live. The cross, Jesus suggests, poetically proclaims both of these astounding ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a beautiful definition of our relationship with God and with Christ. The relationships we seek to explore and further develop through our Lenten journey. A definition and an understanding that thankfully came together in the form it did due to a clandestine nighttime visit to Jesus by one of the highest ranking temple authorities of his day. A man who was on his own Lenten journey, if you will. A journey to seek to deepen his relationship with God, doing so by cultivating a relationship with Jesus, who showed him the way.

While we do not know much more about Nicodemus, we do know that his journey continued. He appears only two more times in John’s Gospel. The next is when he expresses sympathy for Jesus to the temple authorities, urging them not to act hastily but to give Jesus a fair hearing before deciding if he is actually a heretic (Jn 7.51-52). And the final time is right after Jesus’ crucifixion, when Nicodemus goes with Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus’ body for burial in Joseph’s own tomb (Jn 19.39-42). Such a tender act for the One the rest of the temple authorities viewed as a heretic and a condemned criminal. An act making a profound statement of Nicodemus’ own journey of faith. A profound statement of his coming to a place of recognizing the truth of who Jesus was and is.

We could do worse than having Nicodemus as our guide on our Lenten journey. For we, too, often come to Jesus in the darkness of our own lives. Coming to him in our own confusion, with our own questions. Seeking to understand who he is. To understand his message. Seeking to be in deeper relationship with him. As we continue on our Lenten journey, with Nicodemus as our guide, we are sure to gain deeper insight and understanding, leading us, with Nicodemus, to that most intimate act: preparing our crucified Lord for his burial in the tomb. Preparing him, and us, for what follows.

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<sup>1</sup> “Gospel: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Lent 2,” SALT, February 27, 2023. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/3/2/gospel-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-2>.