

**Sunday, March 1, 2026**  
**Second Sunday in Lent (Year A)**

John 3.1-17

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**“Going Public”**

Last week, we began a Lenten quest, symbolized by Jesus being tempted in the wilderness for forty days. A time in which he sought to discern who he was as the Son of God and how that identity would shape his life and his public ministry. This forty-day wilderness quest being a model, of sorts, for our own forty-day Lenten season. A time in which we intentionally seek to discern how we, as members of the Body of Christ in the world, can deepen our relationship with God and with Christ; how we can live more fully into who God has created and calls us to be. Our Lenten quest began with Jesus as our guide. In the remaining weeks of Lent, we meet additional guides who, through their own encounters with Jesus, will provide additional insight into what this Lenten quest is about, what our life’s quest is about, and help guide us as we move ever closer to Jerusalem and to Easter.

Today, Jesus passes the baton to an unlikely guide: Nicodemus. As we are told, Nicodemus is a Pharisee and “a leader of the Jews.” Based on other statements elsewhere in the Gospels, we can glean that he was a member of the Sanhedrin: the primary judicial and legislative body in ancient Israel. A sort of a blending of Congress and the Supreme Court. So Nicodemus is a high-powered and influential leader, charged with upholding secular and religious law.

We first meet Nicodemus creeping around under cover of night. Hardly a fitting image for one of the most powerful men in all Israel. And yet, as the Gospel unfolds, it becomes apparent that there is a valid and compelling reason for his actions here. In short, that Nicodemus is on his own quest. Nicodemus is searching for something deeper. Despite being a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, one sworn to uphold the tenets and practices of Judaism, there seems to be something missing in his life of faith. And he sees that Jesus might just hold the answers he seeks. Because of his position, and because of Jesus’ reputation for being a nuisance, for being counter-cultural, for challenging the religious authorities, Nicodemus cannot be seen openly engaging Jesus. At least, not outside the sanctity of the Temple. Hence, the clandestine meet-up under cover of night.

The imagery of Nicodemus coming to Jesus under cover of darkness is itself telling. From the very beginning, John’s Gospel employs the image of light and dark. “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn 1.3b-5). Light symbolizing ways in which God and the Word—Jesus—are present in the world. Ways in which the truth of God’s love manifest through Jesus has come into the world to dispel darkness: the darkness that seeks to keep us from knowing and experiencing God’s unbounded love and grace. In today’s Gospel, Nicodemus momentarily emerges out of the darkness of the ignorance and limitations of his own education, culture, and lived experiences, seeking light from Jesus. Seeking a new path for himself. And maybe, in time, seeking a new path for his own people? It’s just that, right now, Nicodemus is not ready to go public. He is not ready to declare his newly budding faith in Jesus by the light of day. He needs a little more to go on, needs to do more work on himself, before going public.

Before we get to Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus, it is worth briefly noting just how Nicodemus serves as a model and a potential guide for us. We are not high-powered religious authorities. We are not entrenched in a religious system which Jesus has come to correct and reform. We are part of the reform that Jesus himself instituted. We are not living in darkness, but are already living in the light of God's love. Or are we? Recent events at home and around the world indicate otherwise. This is where Nicodemus is uniquely qualified to be our guide. While we are already followers of Christ—something that Nicodemus is only just beginning to explore—we do live in a world of divided loyalties, just as Nicodemus was experiencing. While we are followers of Jesus, there are likely areas of our lives where that part of us is pushed into the shadows. There may be areas of our lives where we feel we need to compartmentalize our faith—keeping it secret, separate from other parts of our lives. As a simple example, those who are in public education have to be very careful about expressing personal religious beliefs so as not to run afoul of perceived issues regarding separation of church and state. And sometimes, in our lives, there may just be areas where overt expression of religious perspectives is not accepted or tolerated, despite First Amendment rights. Living in such a complex society, we often feel a need—rightly or wrongly—to compartmentalize, to sequester our personal religious lives. Even clergy. So, all this makes Nicodemus a perfect guide for us, as he most definitely needed to compartmentalize his own struggles with faith issues, particularly from his day job.

Nicodemus emerges from the dark of his compartmentalized life and greets Jesus with a fairly innocent observation—lest anyone be listening in—about Jesus being “a teacher who has come from God.” Jesus sees through the “safe” comments Nicodemus makes, seeing into his heart and recognizing that Nicodemus is searching. He wants to know more, to more fully experience God in the way Jesus has been teaching. Jesus offers a way to what Nicodemus seeks: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus responds, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” Nicodemus completely misunderstands Jesus. How does he hear “being born from above” and end up at “being born again”? It's not that Nicodemus misheard or that he is a bit dense. It's actually a language problem. The word Jesus uses for “born from above” actually has three meanings: 1) to be born again, 2) to be born anew, and 3) to be born from above. The first of these—to be born again—being the simplest meaning; the other two being far more nuanced. Nicodemus, caught in a rigid way of thinking and therefore unable to understand what Jesus is saying, defaults to the first and perhaps simplest meaning: to be born again.

In an attempt to clarify, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Subtly implying that the real answer to Nicodemus' question lies in the other two interpretations. Being born anew having a more physical nuance, while being born from above has a decidedly spiritual nuance. Bringing the two together, with images of water and the Spirit, indicating that it is not an either/or but a both/and. That new life in the Kingdom of God that Nicodemus seeks requires both a physical and a spiritual transformation. With the spiritual transformation leading to the physical transformation. The spiritual transformation as the image of being born from above and the physical transformation as the image of being born anew.

Of course, in our Christian tradition, these two images of water and Spirit as the means to new life in Christ come together in our sacrament of baptism. This form of baptism being different and more nuanced than the Jewish rite of repentance John the Baptist performed. The Christian rite of baptism being our own understanding of the means to enter into the new life of God's kingdom. The new life that Nicodemus himself is seeking. And while Christian baptism is not yet available to Nicodemus, it does provide a good analogy for what Jesus is talking about.

When Jesus talks about being born of Spirit, he is quite simply referring to the Holy Spirit, to God's ongoing presence, coming upon us and dwelling in us. Something we believe to be a part of the sacrament of baptism. But in the context Jesus is conveying to Nicodemus, being born of the Spirit is about being open to receiving and being transformed by God's ongoing presence in our lives. To be open to allowing God, working through the Spirit, to work in us and through us. Like the wind blowing where it chooses. Not something that can be seen, only the effects of the Spirit can be observed. Guiding, motivating, inspiring, energizing us to live as he is calling us to do. Transforming us to live in accordance with God's desires and purposes.

When Jesus talks about being born of water, he is referring to allowing our new life in the Spirit, the new life that is facilitated by the Spirit, to become manifest in our lives in tangible ways. In physical ways. In our sacrament of baptism, this new life is symbolized through water. Water representing the cleansing and renewing that occurs in baptism. Beyond that, water representing physical birth, representing physical life. Evoking images of water being necessary for life, of the amniotic fluid that nurtures and supports a fetus in the womb in anticipation of birth, in anticipation of life. In this, Nicodemus is partially right: "How can one be born after having grown old?" With respect to life in God's kingdom that Jesus is talking about, with respect to what Nicodemus is seeking, this is indeed more metaphorical. Rather, where the new birth occurs in a physical sense is that once we are "born from above," born of the Spirit, are energized by God's Spirit working in our lives, the next logical step is the physical manifestation of that new life. Not that our physical body changes, but rather, what we DO with and in our body changes. That the Spirit working in us is translated into physical actions. That we make our spiritual transformation, or new spiritual life, tangible, make them physical, through our actions. That we truly begin to live our new life of faith in body, mind, and spirit.

We know all of this. It is an inherent part of what it means to be a Christian. The trick is to continually seek to live that more fully, so that our new life in the Spirit, manifest in our physical actions, grows to permeate, to be integral to, our entire life. To all aspects of our life.

This is where Nicodemus becomes our guide, the true source of inspiration as we seek to integrate our life of faith, our new life in the Spirit, more fully into all areas of our life. As we see in today's Gospel, Nicodemus emerges out of the darkness of night, and the darkness of his own education, experience, and societal constraints, seeking light from Jesus, only to return to the darkness. But that does not mean that he ceases to be our guide. For it is in what happens with Nicodemus down the road that shows us the way, as well. We do not know if Nicodemus ever had any other meetings with Jesus. I like to think this was just the first of a number of clandestine meetings, Nicodemus emerging from the dark, receiving enlightenment from Jesus, each time being a little more transformed, with the darkness he lives in gradually dissipating over time.

What we do know is that Nicodemus was indeed transformed. He was—be it instantaneously or gradually—born anew, born from above. Nicodemus appears two more times in John’s Gospel. Once before the Sanhedrin, where he intercedes on behalf of Jesus. When the council is seeking to find a way to get rid of Jesus, Nicodemus dares to speak out, reminding his colleagues of the rule of law and due process (Jn 7.50-52). A safe way of supporting Jesus in Nicodemus’ professional capacity, without “outing” himself as a follower of Jesus. Although he does face some mild criticism for doing so. And the final time Nicodemus appears in John’s Gospel is following Jesus’ crucifixion, when Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea ask Pontius Pilate for Jesus’ body so they can bury him properly (Jn 19.38-42).

The fact that Nicodemus would be willing to “go public” and do something so visible—in the light of day, no less—as to bury Jesus, is a powerful image of Nicodemus’ transformation. A powerful image of his ultimately being born from above and being born anew. Of his new-found faith being manifest in tangible ways, consequences be damned.

As we continue our Lenten quest, may we have the courage to follow the example of Nicodemus, who struggled with figuring out how to more fully follow Jesus, even when doing so presented challenges in parts of his life; that like him, we might be born from above, be born anew, and break through the darkness to prepare for and receive the light of Christ’s glory come Easter.