

2nd Sunday in Lent - A (2026)

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5

John 3:1-17

“Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus responds to Nicodemus, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We begin our second week in the annual wilderness journey with Jesus through the season of Lent, having accepted the invitation ‘to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.’

Lent began with us being reminded of our mortal nature, that we are fragile, yet wonderfully made creatures molded out of the dust of the earth, and to dust we shall return. We’ve spent time with Jesus being tempted by Satan in the wilderness, ongoing temptations to renounce his sonship and to take shortcuts to glory, recognizing that demonic and dark forces will continue their efforts to thwart the plans of God, with the assurance that the Spirit and the heavenly angels are always at hand. Some of us joined for supper and spiritual teaching around the use of icons as a potential Lenten spiritual practice of spending more time with God, exploring the theological depth they reveal as windows into the divine. Our journey continues today in John’s Gospel of the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, a meeting that engages flesh and spirit, law and heart, dark and light, below and above.

We do not know much about Nicodemus. He’s referred to only in John’s Gospel, and only on three occasions. That said, we know that he was a Pharisee, whom the gospel refers to as a ‘leader of the Jews.’ To their credit, the Pharisees were faithful. Their strict interpretation of the Law was

an attempt to help the people show appropriate devotion to God, and their concern regarding Jesus was that he wasn't following the traditions and law in the 'right way.' Their strict devotion to the Law, their rigorous approach of 'doing,' ran against the teaching of Jesus about 'being,' that one's heart was a greater reflection of one's love of God than 'doing' all the right things.

We can surmise that Nicodemus is at least curious about Jesus. He's willing to meet with him, though under the cover of darkness. In chapter 7 of John's Gospel, we read that he subsequently defended Jesus within the Sanhedrin, encouraging his fellow Pharisees to at least give Jesus a hearing to learn more about this itinerant preacher from Galilee, and finally, him bringing spices to assist Joseph of Arimethia in preparing Jesus' body for burial in the tomb, a reflection of his wealth and respect for Jesus. Scripture doesn't tell us any other decisions Nicodemus made regarding his relationship with Jesus, but it's clear that Jesus had an impact on this devout and committed religious leader.

Nicodemus meets Jesus at 'night.' There is much symbolism to the timing, with 'night' being a reflection of 'spiritual darkness.' Nicodemus comes to Jesus in a state of wondering, not yet ready for a conversation during the 'day' when others, including some of his fellow Pharisees, might see him. He has said that he's aware of all the signs Jesus has done, signs only done with the presence of God. Something has drawn him to this nocturnal encounter, the same sense that drew many of us to wonder who this Jesus was as we began our spiritual journey toward a relationship with him.

So often, Jesus will respond to someone's question or statement with a question. Not with Nicodemus; not on this night. Jesus cuts to the chase of his teaching, that to see the kingdom of God, one must be born from above. To be clear, the kingdom, or reign if you prefer, of God, is the reality one experiences internally that requires a transformed heart and the indwelling presence of the divine to comprehend and enter it. To those whose hearts and minds are not properly aligned toward this reality, the kingdom is invisible. To see, to live in the kingdom, requires a total transformation that enables one to see and live according to the will of God.

Things and ways of God are not known nor seen by those whose focus remains on things 'below,' the ways of the flesh (world) vs the ways of the spirit (divine). Jesus suggests that Nicodemus, given his religious credentials, should at least have an inkling of what he is speaking about.

But Nicodemus, like many who have followed after him, stays stuck in the ego, the rational world he inhabits. The Rev'd. Sara Irwin puts it this way, "Nicodemus is puzzling this out in a very 'apples vs. oranges' kind of way. He is trying to use geometry to solve a poem, trying to use an axe to cut off a slice of bread. He is, as Jesus later puts it, not understanding 'the earthly' and therefore not having any chance whatsoever of getting at 'the heavenly.'"

'Born from above.' This 'rebirthing' isn't something we can do; it is a loving act of God. This radical renewal of our souls is, in fact, a transformation of our very essence. This change of heart, soul, and mind is not merely about behaving better, trying harder, or doing more. It is the complete regeneration, becoming spiritually alive, that renews our nature. This renewed nature allows us to repent, believe, and trust in Jesus. It is the process that takes us from spiritual death to spiritual life. It takes our old way of living in the world, the Law, if you will, and expands it to the two great commandments of loving God and loving neighbor.

I've been a 'believer' my entire life. And yet, I found myself resonating with Nicodemus, wondering who Jesus was, questioning the value of a relationship with him, trying so hard to do all the right things, that I failed to see and understand the metanoia, the change that was required so that I could 'enter the kingdom of God.' It wasn't until the birth of our first son that this began to ring true for me. I finally started to understand what Jesus meant by the wind blows where it will, and that this Spirit is unpredictable and powerful. I finally started to scratch the surface of what it means to repent and the subsequent sense of freedom God grants by his grace for my desire to 'change direction' and return to the ways of the life-giving Spirit, a spirit breathed into us by the one who so loved the world

‘that he gave us his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’

So let’s end where we started: our annual trek through the wilderness of discovery, self-examination, and wonderment that ultimately leads to the cross at Calvary and the return of the Alleluias at Easter. Some of us may engage this time like Nicodemus, wondering how one is ‘born from above,’ of moving from spiritual darkness to spiritual illumination. Others will recommit to the focus of spiritual renewal through prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and acts of charity and goodwill. Still others may find themselves on the continuum between the two. Just remember, the real work of Lent is centered around being open to being ‘reborn.’ This is a time of intentionally allowing ourselves to be changed at our very core by the God who seeks not our condemnation, but our salvation; not our despair, but renewed hope; our allegiance not only with our lips but in our lives; not our living on the fringes of darkness, but in the open light of freedom. Our journey continues, dear friends. Journey well.