

Title: Doing as Nicodemus Did
Date: 3/5/2023 (Lent 2, Year A)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Genesis 12:1-4a](#); [Romans 4:1-5, 13-17](#); [John 3:1-17](#); [Psalm 121](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/569EnLxQymQ?t=1171>

The LORD shall preserve you from all evil;
it is [the Lord] who shall keep you safe.
The LORD shall watch over your going out and your coming in,
from this time forth for evermore. (Ps 121:7-8)
Amen.

I'm starting to think that the people who devised this calendar of readings are out to get the preachers. Last week we had Adam and Eve and the Fall, and the Spirit leading Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil. We can spend hours unpacking just a word or two in these verses. And keeping in mind that neither the words "sin" nor "fall" appeared in last week's passage from Genesis, we can spend hours unpacking the words that have come to be associated with those verses.

The same applies to this week's readings. We can spend hours exploring the concepts of "justification by faith" and "justification by works." Paul used them to justify his portrayal of Abraham as the ancestor of **all** who believe, not just the ancestor of the Jews. Later on, Luther and Calvin used these concepts to justify the Reformation, to highlight the distinction between Protestants and Catholics.

Then there is John 3:16. It appears on the faces of football players¹ and on the bottom of the soda cups at In & Out. It's been used to celebrate and to condemn, to promise eternal life and to pronounce eternal death.²

How many of you have heard the phrase "born again"? It comes from today's gospel. You didn't hear it just now because the version of the Bible we read from (NRSV) chose to translate it as "born from above." It can also be translated as "born anew."³

If we had enough time and preachers, it would be awesome to turn sermons on Sunday into something like "choose your own spiritual adventure." We'd split up into different rooms so you can go down the rabbit hole most fascinating to you. Or follow the trail of the word or phrase most troublesome to you, that weighs on you the most. There are so many rabbit holes, so many trails to follow. How do you even begin to choose?

Nicodemus chose to come to Jesus in the middle of the night. What kind of things do we do in the middle of the night? Things we don't want other people to know, things we don't want other people to see. On the flip side, in the middle of the night, when no one's looking, we don't have to project an image, we don't have to be something for someone else. We don't have to hide our feelings; we don't have to hide our doubts.

Nicodemus is presented to us as "a Pharisee, [and] a leader of the Jews." In the Gospel according to John, whenever we see the phrase "the Jews" (Ἰουδαῖοι *Ioudaioi* ee-oo-

dah'-yo) it doesn't actually refer to all Jewish people. According to some scholars, it refers specifically to people born to be leaders of the Temple.⁴

This is a very important distinction because this means Nicodemus wasn't just any leader. He was a leader of a group of people who inherited their role as religious authorities, as did he. This means he had an image to uphold, a reputation to maintain. Even as that group looked to him for guidance, in Jesus he saw someone who could teach him a thing or two.

The problem was that Jesus had just caused some trouble at the Temple. He made a whip of cords and drove out the people who sold cattle, sheep and doves. He poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables (John 2:13-16).

Nicodemus could have felt defensive or judged on behalf of the people in charge of the Temple, since he was one of them. Instead, he saw this as a sign that this man knows God. He was aware that this man is grounded in the presence and authority of God in a way that he himself wasn't. He wasn't the only person who felt that way, given that he told Jesus, "[W]e know that you are a teacher who has come from God" (Jn 3:2). But he was the only one who was willing to show up, even in the middle of the night.

Before Nicodemus could organize all the trails his mind was following and all the rabbit holes he wanted to go down into some kind of question that he could speak out loud, Jesus told him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (Jn 3:3).

Nicodemus' mind came to a screeching halt.

He didn't have the benefit of knowing the rest of the gospel according to John. He hadn't ever met anyone who insisted that he accepts Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior so that he could be born again.

So, he asked, "How can any be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Some people think he took Jesus' question too literally. Some people think he was trying to envision how we could crawl back into the womb and be reborn. Our interpretation of his questions may say more about us than it does about him.

He could have been asking, "Am I too old to change? Is it too late for me?"

As someone born into his job, he could have been thinking, "My society and my family have told me this is who I am and what I can do. The only way for things to be different is for me to have been born to different parents, in a different place...right?"

We know, or at least I hope we know, that we are never too old to change. It is never too late. Lent is all about change, big or small, that we can make permanent. With help from

God, with help from the body of Christ, we can be someone other than who our family thinks we are, we can be more than what society expects us to be.

As for being born of water, Jesus told the Samaritan woman by the well that all we have to do is to drink of the water that Jesus will give us, and that water will become in us a spring of water gushing up to eternal life (Jn 4:13-14).

As for being born of spirit, Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper that all we have to do is to invite the Holy Spirit to abide with us and in us. Then the Spirit of truth (Jn 14:17) that God sent into the world after Jesus' death and resurrection will teach us everything and remind us of all that Jesus has said to us (Jn 14:25-26).

As Jesus told Nicodemus, all we have to do is to keep our eyes on him, lifted up on the cross and on the day he ascended into heaven, so that we may follow him through the doors of death and into eternal life.

Words and concepts like "born again" and "justification by faith" are important, and we can get so caught up in them and how other people use them that we don't even realize that we've taken our eyes off of Jesus.

We can get so wrapped up in wrestling with the letters of the law, of scripture, of the church, that there is no room for the Spirit to move in and with us.

We can get so thirsty for being right and for proving that other people are wrong and thus condemned and we're right and thus saved that we stop drinking from the Living Water without even realizing it.

Lent is often described as a time for self-reflection. It's more of a time for self-dedication. Recognizing that we have gone stray from the ways of God, we go down rabbit holes or follow trails with an eye toward turning back toward God.

To do this as Nicodemus did, let's be open and vulnerable in front of God, whether it means having a heart to heart with God in the middle of the night or showing up to a Lenten Study.

Let's not be afraid to ask the questions that come to mind, even if we're worried that other people might think they're stupid questions. Someone else in the room is probably asking the same thing. Last Sunday, we observed Ash Wednesday with the youth in EYC and the college students in Canterbury, and they asked questions about sin and forgiveness and death that I don't usually get from adults.

Let's keep showing up, keep practicing our faith however we can, wherever we can. As Jesus pointed out in today's passage, Nicodemus didn't understand what Jesus was saying about the flesh and the Spirit and the wind. After this, Nicodemus showed up twice more in this gospel, once to defend the Temple police for not arresting Jesus (Jn 7:51-52), and once to anoint and wrap the body of Jesus with a hundred pounds of spices before laying him in the tomb (Jn 19:39-42). (The women who anointed Jesus'

feet used just one pound, and that was a year's wages). We don't know if he ever understood what Jesus said to him that night or how he came to make sense of it, but by the end we saw his faith in the words of his mouth and the works of his hands.

So, this Lent, let us be a little bit like Nicodemus.

O God,
grant us the courage to confess our beliefs as Nicodemus did, even if in secret, grant us
the humility to seek understanding as Nicodemus did,
even if we would rather sound smart,
and grant us the perseverance
to keep following Jesus in thought, word, and deed,
in a way that's true to where each of us is at
in our spiritual journey. Amen.

¹ <https://fanbuzz.com/nfl/tim-tebow-john-316/#:~:text=Never%20was%20that%20more%20evident,by%20the%20NCAA%20in%202010.>

² <https://www.today.com/food/why-does-n-out-print-bible-verses-its-cups-wrappers-t164235>

³ Harper Collins Study Bible New Testament p 1819

⁴ "Introduction to the Gospel According to John", The New Oxford Annotated Bible, p147 New Testament. The translation of this term is still contested and studied and there are other ways to interpret it.