

## **Lent 2**

**March 5, 2023**

**John 3:1-17**

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Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Maybe he was up late studying the Hebrew Bible. Religious leaders even today are known to stay up into the wee hours reading and discussing scripture.

Maybe he had insomnia--some of us are well-acquainted with that problem--we might suggest he get some Quviviq or ZQuil. But that might not be such a great idea--people have been known to do all sorts of crazy things while taking those medications: driving, eating a half gallon of ice cream, ordering 20 pairs of shoes online...But maybe nothing as wild as going out to look for the Messiah!

Do you wonder if everytime Nicodemus put his head on the pillow, his mind kept racing? He couldn't decide about Jesus: "I heard he turned water into wine. He flipped the money changers table in the Temple. They are saying Jesus is the Messiah, sent from God. I wonder if they're right, because how can there be wine from water if it's not from God? But if Jesus is from God, why isn't he studying with us? What if this *is* the Messiah and I miss it?"

Tossing and turning; the kind of questioning we have in the banners before us this Lent. Why did it seem God wasn't answering? I'm faithful, why am I being left out of this? Tossing and turning, Nicodemus finally got up to go find Jesus, figuring it was safe because no one would see him. He was seeking something, something about God and God's presence in the world and in his life. Do you think he knew exactly what he hoped to find?

Have you had those moments in your own life, whether in the middle of the night or the harsh light of day? Times when your mind is racing with thoughts that bend and twist and come back at you again like a Formula One track?

“What am I supposed to be doing at this point in my life? Where is God in all of this? It seems so easy for some other people--I really wish I could figure things out.”

Some of us charge ahead with confidence anyway--others of us feel frozen, uncertain and hesitant of what our next step might be.

Nicodemus seems to fall into that category--stuck. And so he goes knocking, knocking on Jesus' door, stepping out of the darkness of night into the light of the fire or the oil lamp. What follows is one of the most unusual and maybe confusing conversations in the Bible.

Nicodemus starts off kind of babbling: “Teacher, we know you are from God, because if you weren't, you wouldn't be doing all the stuff you're doing.”

And Jesus answers on a completely different level: “I know you want to know about the kingdom of God. You can't see it unless you are born from above.” “What? How can I, an old guy, become a baby and be born again?”

Nicodemus is on one level, and Jesus wants to talk on another, deeper level, about faith and the Holy Spirit and letting go.

Nicodemus wants simple answers that will satisfy: who is Jesus; what does he need to *do* to be with Jesus; is this the Messiah; is this *really* God in action--with the answers, he can roll everything around in his mind some more and *make a decision*.

That's something you may have heard a time or two when it comes to faith: making a decision for Christ; accepting Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior. For some Christians, that is *the* test of whether you are faithful or not, saved or not. Years ago in Denver, a prominent church had bumper stickers that just said “I Found It!” The “it” was Jesus and they found him.

Lutherans can be a bit intimidated by that kind of talk. Is there some secret we're missing? Do we need to figure out what Jesus wants or we'll be out of luck?

Jesus can hold a deep theological discussion and will do that again in the scripture passages we'll hear the following two Sundays. But the heart of today's Gospel is a promise--Good News spoken not only to our heads, but to our hearts. Verses 16 and 17 offer that promise--both verses.

John 3:16 is of course the favorite to memorize and hang onto, but it has also been used by Christians as a triumphant text, a way of saying "I'm in with Jesus; you'd better get here, too!"

That interpretation seems to forget how the well-known verse begins: *God so loved the world--loves the world*. That's a mystery for our hearts. God loves not just the wonderful, the delightful, the places of mercy and carefree laughter. God loves the whole world--including places of violence and selfishness, the parts of our humanity we'd rather not think about. God loves even the curve inside each one of us that turns in on ourselves and away from God.

"How can this be?!" we might say, echoing Nicodemus. How is that possible? God so *loves* the world that the Son came not to condemn the world, but to save it and us from everything that draws us away from the mystery and promise of that love. To be loved like that, in all our human complexity, without our doing anything, is meant to change us.

We hear that in Jesus' answers to Nicodemus: "*You don't need to make a decision about **me***, because God has already made a decision about you and the whole world. In me, God's love is going to blow into your life and blow right through you to others."

Do you think Nicodemus found that unsettling or comforting? How about you? In the water of baptism Jesus names us child of God and beloved. (What a wonderful thing that we've celebrated baptisms for three Sundays in a row!) And in the bread and wine, we are invited to the kingdom Nicodemus was seeking--a banquet where love and forgiveness flows as it did on the cross.

Among all the thoughts that keep us awake at night, or set us on edge during the day, **whether God loves us or not doesn't need to be one of them!**

What freedom--what a gift, meant to be shared and lived in our own small circles and wider and wider--through prayer and listening and advocacy and giving of ourselves and all we have.

*God so loved the world.* Loved so much, embraced by water and the Spirit, how might you give that love away, so that other people might also Rise and Sing Again?