

**OPENER:**

Good morning and welcome to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent.

This week we have changed locales; last week, we *were* in the wilderness, being tempted by the devil, this week we have entered the darkness.

So many of the most important Gospel scenes happen at night; Jesus' birth, the agony in the Garden, and even Jesus's death, all occur when the lights go out.<sup>1</sup> Our Gospel today features another one, with this episode of "Nick at Night."

So, again, welcome to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent and "Welcome to the Night"—where Jesus continues to show us that he is willing to go wherever in order to be with us.

**NICODEMUS**

The old saying goes that there are three rules in life. They are:

- 1) Never get into a poker game with a someone named "Doc", and
- 2) Never get into a fight with a guy named "Tiny" and
- 3) Never engage in a rabbinical style argument about theology, with a guy named "Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

Nicodemus breaks the 3<sup>rd</sup> rule, but also the 1<sup>st</sup>, in our Gospel story, as he is willing to engage Jesus in a night-time game of high-stakes, "No-Limit" Texas Hold 'Em.

Nicodemus does so on his own terms.

Nicodemus is a hedger of bets, not willing to commit fully—while open to the possibilities that Jesus offers.

Nicodemus, from our Gospel reading today, is decidedly not "ALL IN."

"All In" in poker, for the unfamiliar, is "the moment when a player—whether out of bravado, recklessness, or desperation—bets all of his or her chips on a single hand."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick. 1977. *Telling the Truth: the Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Nelson Algren's original list in his 1956 novel, *A Walk on the Wild Side*.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Crouch "Going All In on 'All In'" *The New Yorker* (September 7, 2015)

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/going-all-in-on-all-in>

Nicodemus, having met Jesus at night, in a seedy backroom, so to speak, behind closed doors, at an underground game away from the authorities, holds back by not putting his chips all in, he has not folded or left the table, but rather he keeps: checking the bet, bidding his time, lurking in the shadows to see what will happen next.

“Nick at Night” comes to Jesus for answers, but hesitantly, in stops and starts. In doing so, Nicodemus reveals to us a model of discipleship that looks so human and realistic, because it looks so much like you and me. Nicodemus was “neither the first nor the last in the church to follow Jesus from afar.”<sup>4</sup>

### **DISCIPLESHIP:**

John’s Gospel highlights Nicodemus’ mediocrity by placing his story right after the one where Jesus cleanses the Temple, a story itself which is right after the Wedding at Cana. Thus the writer of the Gospel has arranged in a neat row, a positive case of faith and discipleship, followed by a negative one, and then ours, which is somewhere in the middle.<sup>5</sup>

The disciples at the Wedding at Cana go “All In.”

Jesus’ enemies at the Temple refuse to play.

Nicodemus is in between.

He is in the middle, lurking, waiting, and watching.

Now, the reasons that Nicodemus does this are probably that he did not want his compatriots to know that he was meeting with Jesus.

As a respected and learned member of his community, it would be against his interests to follow this dangerous radical preaching a new message.

But it’s also deeper than that for him, and for us:

“Men like Nicodemus have identified themselves with definitions they know too exactly. They want someone new to confirm a notion *already* fixed inside the heads of those who know best. For them revelation has become, quite unconsciously, a kind of technology” which they wield like a blunt object.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> George W. Stroup “Homiletical Perspective” in Bartlett, David Lyon and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2015. *Feasting on the Word*. (Year A, Volume 2). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, Kapp, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, Raymond. 2008. *The Gospel according to John (I-XII)*. (Volume 1) New Haven: Yale University Press. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Moloney, Francis J. 1998. *The Gospel of John (Sacra Pagina)* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 91, Bishop, J. “Encounters in the New Testament” in Gros Louis, Kenneth R. R., James Stokes Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warshaw, eds. 1982. *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon. 2:292

Nicodemus wants to fit Jesus into the comfortable box that he has created for him, he wants to go only so far.

Nicodemus tries to bet around the edges, tries to flatter Jesus with an honorary but insufficient title.

But Jesus keeps raising the stakes, specifically with this uncomfortable language about “being born from above.”

## **GOSPEL:**

One of the things I remember not liking growing up was hearing the story of my birth. And, as a twin, you hear it a lot. I did not like hearing it because I did not do anything in the process. I was not the protagonist, or the hero. I was the object, the predicate of the story.

So, I preach this morning and every morning, so it is with a life of faith.

God is the subject, we are the object.

Thus, we must hear the statement: “to be born again” as an invitation rather than a command. It is asking us to do something we cannot do by ourselves, it’s a reminder that we need God.

Nicodemus would have preferred to have done it on his own.

But God is ready to do the hard, sweaty work of labor for us.

In our gospel, Jesus indeed gets impatient, like a mother late in her pregnancy, he wants to shove Nicodemus through the birth canal.

Regardless: “Rebirth is God’s gift to give.”<sup>7</sup>

MOM Hill outside Calvary/

We will never be able to manage, not to mention conquer, our fears alone.

Particularly, in this moment in time, a moment of unprecedented division and instability; one where fear seems to surround us and envelop us and thus threatens to consume us.

This moment, at least, will help us realize and recognize the reality about who God is. We should know that Jesus has the Ace of Spades (John 3.16) “the gospel in miniature” in his hands, offering it to us as a lifeline and as comfort. We should accept the invitation for him to play it on our behalf.

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<sup>7</sup> Deborah J. Kapp “Pastoral Perspective” in Bartlett, David Lyon and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2015. *Feasting on the Word*, 72

Nicodemus, in turn, has the Dead Man's Hand, a set of cards he *thinks* that will get him where he needs.

He does not realize that he has to lose it all, to die, to become like a child, to be born again, to be born above, in order to come into the light.

## **CONCLUSION**

So what can Nicodemus and Jesus' exchange teach us, here in 2026, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent?

We have all been there, that moment when you say "I fold" to God over your addiction or some deep hurt or "I give up" to the family member over a grudge or resentment or "I have nothing left to give" at the hospital because a friend is dying

That's how we enter, or rather are ushered, in from the darkness, pass through the twilight, and into the light.

In this Lenten Season, I invite you to think about ways that you can be ALL IN, in that way, in your relationship with God.

It's a paradox, it's non-sensical—Jesus' invitation "to be born again" which invites us to lose. But to recognize our fear of the dark, to acknowledge it, but to look for and come towards the light.

There is hope, of course. In the end, John's Gospel offers a word of grace with our friend Nicodemus. Nicodemus ultimately gives up and folds and come around in the end. Nicodemus, the writer goes out of his way to mention, was there after Jesus was crucified, he joined with Joseph of Arimathea to help anoint Christ' body and prepare the tomb.<sup>8</sup>

A secret disciple no longer, at the end of the Gospel,  
he moves all the chips in,  
and he does so in the daylight,  
May we be like him.

**AMEN**

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<sup>8</sup> John 19.38-42 (also 7:50-52)