

THE SERMON SUPPLY



A Resource from
Region 6



Second Sunday in Lent, Year A

Pastor Sarah Schaaf, Northwestern Ohio Synod
Assistant to the Bishop for Community Engagement and Emerging Church
Gospel Text - John 3:1-17

John 3:1-17

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus^[a] by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."^[b] ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You^[c] must be born from above.'^[d] ⁸ The wind^[e] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you^[f] do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[g] ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[h]

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

SERMON TEXT:

“Alex, does God go on vacation?”

I’ll admit, it was an unusual question—but that was precisely the point. At the time, I was a senior religion major conducting a study on the faith development of children. Alex, just four years old, was the youngest child I interviewed. He was bright, creative, and witty. Throughout our conversation, he busied himself coloring a spaceship. (Alex was going to be an astronaut.)

That day, I had been interrupting Alex’s coloring with questions about God, hoping to paint a picture of his faith. The questions were designed to be unexpected, so Alex couldn’t simply repeat what he had heard from others. I wanted to hear who Alex thought God was and how he imagined God interacted with people and the world.

And so I asked... “Alex, does God go on vacation?”

“Yep,” he said, without dropping a beat.

By that point, I had interviewed over a dozen children. They had all kinds of creative ideas about God, but they all agreed on one thing: God simply couldn’t go on vacation. After all, who would watch the world?

So Alex's confident "yep" piqued my curiosity. I asked the question that begged to be asked. "Alex," I said, "can you tell me where God goes when God is on vacation?"

Alex kept right on coloring. Then he said something I have never forgotten.

"Well," he said, "I'm pretty sure God goes to visit the people who don't believe in him."

Best answer ever. God the Almighty—the Alpha and Omega, the maker of all things in heaven and on earth—has nothing better to do with precious time than to visit those who don't believe yet.

It didn't occur to me until much later, but there are at least two ways you could receive Alex's profession of faith. You could hear the arrival of God as **law**—as a judgment on your behavior. Or you could hear it as **gospel**—as a gift of grace.

God is coming to visit you—now you're in trouble!
How unfaithful must you be that God would enter into the world just so you can finally believe?

Or—
God is coming to visit you. What a gift!

How fortunate—how utterly loved—you are that God would enter into the world simply to be near you, so that you can finally believe.

I can't be certain, but I suspect that a theologian like Alex—who dreamed of traveling into distant space—recognized God's journey to earth for what it was: a gift.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee—a member of the Jewish ruling class—goes looking for Jesus at night.

Can you imagine the scene?

He pulls a cloak around his shoulders and steps out into the uncertainty of the darkness, his feet tracing familiar paths now softened and distorted by shadow. The streets are quieter than they are by day. Every sound carries. Every movement feels exposed.

Slowly, carefully, he makes his way until at last he stands at Jesus' door.

I have always wondered—did he knock? Did he announce his name into the silence? Was Jesus surprised to see him, or had he been expecting Nicodemus all along? Was Jesus roused from sleep, or was he already awake, waiting in the stillness of the night for a conversation that Nicodemus would not make in daylight?

And what compelled Nicodemus to come in the first place? What question pressed so urgently on his heart that he was willing to leave the warmth and safety of home, to walk through the dark, to risk being seen—seeking Jesus with no promise that the door would open, no assurance that understanding would come?

Was this a carefully considered decision?

Or the kind of journey you make in the middle of the night...
when the questions in your head refuse to let you sleep?

All we know for certain is this: Nicodemus came... and Jesus received him.

It seems that Jesus has nothing better to do in the middle of the night than to sit there in the darkness, inviting Nicodemus into the light.

What follows is a lively theological conversation. Nicodemus is respectful and attentive—eager, even—but he still gets far more wrong than right. He asks question after question, and Jesus answers with words that are just mysterious enough to keep Nicodemus engaged but also utterly confused. *“How can these things be?”* he asks, as Jesus invites him to see more—to glimpse God’s love stretching wider than Nicodemus had imagined.

Jesus urges Nicodemus...

To reach beyond what he can measure.
Beyond what he can control.
Beyond what he can fully understand.

And Nicodemus—well... he just can’t quite get there.

Not too long ago, I had my own late-night theological conversation.

We were at a Churchwide Assembly. I was holding an item for one of our young adults, and he came to collect it sometime around midnight—with a few friends and another pastor in tow. They sat down “just for a minute.”

An hour later, they were still there.

Question after question poured out as we wondered together about a God who is both present and mysterious—full of love, yet bigger than any of us can fully understand.

I didn’t answer all of their questions that night, but I’m not concerned.

In fact, I slept really well.

Because it has been my experience that those who come searching for God in the dark—those who ask big questions, those who refuse to stop wondering—are already well on their way.

They don’t need me to be the answer to all their questions. They just need someone willing to sit with them... as they wonder about God.

Let me be clear—I say this not because I am confident that, given enough time, they will eventually figure everything out—delightful and wise as those young adults certainly were.

I say this because I am confident in the patience, the endurance, and the love of the God who seeks them through Jesus.

And it has also been my experience that if you find yourself wrestling with God in the night, it is not because doubt has taken hold of you. It is because God simply will not let you go. I trust in the character of that God.

The end of our gospel reading today is not the end of Nicodemus' story.

We will hear from him again.

Nicodemus—the one who first came to Jesus under the cover of night—will eventually begin to speak in the light. It is only a matter of time.

The next time we see him, he is standing in the middle of a tense confrontation with the other Pharisees. By now, Jesus has become a deeply polarizing figure, and many of the religious leaders are already beginning to plot against him.

And Nicodemus, cautiously but clearly, pushes back:

“Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” he asks.

It is not a grand speech.

Not a dramatic confession.

Just a small, steady step toward the light.

The final time Nicodemus appears in scripture is after the crucifixion.

By then, most of the disciples have fled and are hiding in fear.

But Nicodemus—together with Joseph of Arimathea—steps forward. They take Jesus' body and prepare it for burial, anointing him with an astonishing amount of myrrh and aloes—seventy-five pounds.

This is no small gesture.

It is extravagant.

Costly.

The kind of offering usually reserved for royalty.

To be publicly associated with Jesus at that moment—after his execution—was dangerous.

And yet, as Nicodemus tends to Jesus' body, he steps fully out of the shadows and into the light.

His actions become his confession: Jesus is Lord.

John writes - "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17)

There is a lot about the story of Nicodemus that we just don't know.

I don't know how long it took for Nicodemus to move from curiosity... to courage.

I don't know how many questions he carried with him into the night.

Or how many conversations were needed before he could finally open his eyes to who Jesus truly was and what he was offering. And I don't know all the questions you hold, my friend.

What I do know is this: God so loved the world that he sent his Son so that you may believe...

Our God is steadfast.

God is not frightened by our questions.
God is not offended by our uncertainty.
God is not waiting for us to have everything figured out before drawing near.

What I do know is this—

When you find yourself searching in the dark...
When you find yourself awake at night with questions you cannot quiet...
When you find yourself wondering whether you understand any of this at all—

You are not far from the kingdom.

Because the God we meet in Jesus
is a God who keeps showing up in the night,
who sits with us in our confusion,

and who steadily—patiently—
keeps inviting us toward the light.

I don't know a lot of things...

But this I trust: Alex was right...

God will find you.

Because it seems that God the Almighty—the Alpha and Omega, the maker of all things in heaven and on earth—has nothing better to do with precious time than to visit those who don't believe – yet. Amen.

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