

A 2 Lent 2026
Saint Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA
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John 3: 1-17

As we take a deep breach amid a wild week of blizzards and war, as live into the heart of the Lenten season, today we switch from Matthew's Gospel to John's Gospel where we engage a curious conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus

It takes place under cover of darkness—which gives it an intriguing nuance—and Jesus provides what we might call constructive criticism that encourages Nicodemus to turn his life around

Our story ends with perhaps the most quoted Scripture verse—found literally as a bumper sticker on some cars—as a succinct expression of Good News

Is Nicodemus simply a straw man for Jesus' teaching, or in him do we see ourselves there reflected?

God encounters Nicodemus as Jesus calls him out of darkness and into light and eternal life

Now, I want to put in a pitch for Nicodemus, who often gets a bum rap as straw man and cowardly dolt to the more dynamic Jesus

Yes, Nicodemus alternates between a Pharisaic theology wonk and a bumbling seeker, but Jesus embraces Nicodemus as a pilgrim and engages his curious mind

In Nicodemus, Jesus sees a believer ambivalent about letting go of old truths, yet one who risks discarding old platitudes for new relationship with God

Long before Freud, commentators have relished in seeing the darkness in which Jesus confronts Nicodemus as a symbol of wrong faith and non-illumination

Let's remember, however, that the rabbis long taught that the faithful should study the Torah at night, long after the distractions of the day had passed

I'll bet that more than a few of us use the night hours for prayer, reflection, Bible study or diary entries

My point is that God meets us where we are, however awkward our footing might be at any point in time

This God takes the initiative to fill us with life-giving Spirit and lead us into the future, just as Jesus did to Nicodemus

This joyous wisdom applies to us as much as an individual as it does to us in our common life as a parish

For centuries, commentators have spilled ink debating whether Jesus and Nicodemus debating being 'born again' or 'born from above'

In fact, the word *anōthen* can be translated as any of ‘from above,’ ‘anew’ or ‘again’

If one favors ‘born again,’ one risks a works-righteous agenda of human initiative to precipitate revival, whether from an edgy preacher or psychological manipulation

If one favors ‘born from above’ one takes the receptive deference to divine initiative and creation—as in Jesus’ coming from the Father

Being ‘born from above’ is not something we do, but rather something we celebrate and fall onto our knees with tears of gratitude

Being ‘born from above’ leads us to an ethic of stewardship, in which we intentionally share this precious gift of divine force with the world we serve in God’s name

Being born from above also mirrors our being made in the image of God, which has profound implications for social justice and our current immigrant crisis, because the sojourning immigrant is equally created in the image of God as any beautiful people who populate polite society

Amid this Lenten journey, we also acknowledge God’s choice to beget us, along with God’s choice never to forsake us

Instead, we embrace God’s pulsating, redemptive claiming of our lives that provides us a centered present and a dynamic, adventurous future

A moment ago, I mentioned that our gospel comes from John instead of Matthew, whom we typically engage this year

I love John's Gospel—written latest of the four—which embraces a very mature understanding of Jesus' relationship to God

Including today, John regularly reminds us that Jesus is the one sent by the Father and who has come from the father to take us to a deeper relationship with the Father, deeper than a few fascinating miracles or proclamations about the kingdom

Like with Nicodemus, Jesus continually refocuses us on our continuing relationship of love that flows in every direction

Our passage wonderfully suggests the baptismal imagery of water, rebirth and the Holy Spirit's wind that fills us with new breath

Jesus invites Nicodemus to the very rebirth and refreshment to which the Church invites us in baptism

And yet this love stays away from a sloppy-Agape sense of naïve optimism when Lent so continually reminds us of Jesus' making his way to Jerusalem and the ultimate act of sacrificial love

It is in this spirit of sacrificial love that we take nourishment from the famous John 3:16 that completes today's passage

God does not send the Son into the world to condemn it, though any one of us could make the argument for some divine tough love

Reminding us of God's outpouring love to the unfaithful harlot in the OT book of Hosea, God continually seeks us out with a blessing meant to turn us around, capture our attention, and give us courage to face life in a new way

John 3:16 beckons us to open our eyes to a new way of seeing, our hearts to a new way of loving, a road-tested love that lets go of our foibles while embracing the selfless love Jesus showed to us

Looking ahead a few weeks, we will encounter John again in the Easter season, a John who uniquely witnesses to eternal life right here and now—a fulsome dwelling in God's love

Alas, we are not in the Easter season yet but walk with Jesus for 40 days and nights in the wilderness

We greet Nicodemus amid Lent as an invitation to reach out for rebirth and new life

We can bring our stumbling, Oedipal wishes—like Nicodemus' fantasy of climbing back into his mother's womb—or any other part of our humanity, and Jesus can handle our stuff and help us metabolize it into faithful living

When you think about it, Jesus could easily roll his eyes at his human encounters—Nicodemus, the rich man, Peter's wacky ramblings—yet Jesus patiently keeps his eye on God's abiding love and our abiding relationship within the Godhead

So, my friends, night or day, I invite you to throw your deepest longings, clumsiest issues and heartfelt dreams to Jesus in prayer

Share with spiritual friends, as we live out the Body of Christ

Take it into the closet of individual prayer, as Scripture admonished us on Ash Wednesday

Take it to sacramental confession—all may, none must, some should—if that promises relief and transformation

Join our Tuesday contemplative prayer group during Lent for a rich and prayerful combination of solitude and community

Even as you shake off a tough blizzard and feel some vertigo at the thought of another Middle East war, find time to hear the still-small voice of God's spirit

Bring your pains, dreams and longings to Jesus, trusting and living your life as though God is saving you through Him