

Message by the Rev. Hannah Moderow, February 22, 2026.
First Sunday of Lent. St. Mary's Episcopal Church
Scripture: John 3:1-17

MEETING JESUS BY NIGHT

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night (3:1).

Night is our cue that Nicodemus wants to meet with Jesus in secret.

Under cover.

Which gives us, the listeners of this gospel, a privileged position.... Like we're eavesdropping on a conversation that was not intended for our ears.

At the beginning of the story, Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus as “a teacher who has come from God.” He claims to know this because he has seen Jesus perform “signs.” But physical signs aren't the whole story, according to Jesus. He responds to Nicodemus with this perplexing claim: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being **born from above.**” (3:3)

In Christian circles, you have likely heard the terms “born from above” or “born again” or even “born anew.” All three of these translations are possible from the original Greek.

And all three of them are pretty puzzling, if you think about.

What does it mean to be born *from above...again...or anew*?

There are theologies that make “born again” a quick transaction, but I'm pretty sure this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus shows us that “born from above” and “born again” are not simple transactions. They imply deep spiritual transformation.

Nicodemus is clearly confused when he asks Jesus, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?” (3:4)

Here, Nicodemus is so grounded in the physical world, he becomes fixated on the idea of literal rebirth—like how to fly his grown man back into the womb of his mother.

The conversation takes an almost comical turn.

But Jesus doesn't laugh. We don't hear a trace of contempt or ridicule in the narrative; just profound misunderstanding. Jesus and Nicodemus talk *over* and *around* each other.

The first part of this story reminds me of a conversation I had with my daughter when she was young, probably about three years old.

She said, "Mommy, when I get little.... Can I wear this bunny outfit again?" She held up the onesie that she wore home from the hospital.

I was taken aback by her question at first.

I frantically tried to come up with an answer that didn't squash her wild imagination.

"Well, buddy, we don't usually get little... We usually grow bigger as we get older."

"But when I get little, I *will* wear that bunny outfit again..." she said, persistent.

"We can always look at pictures of you in the bunny outfit... and share our memories, but I don't think it will ever fit you again."

Her disappointment was enormous.

For adults, accustomed to the world, "getting little" isn't a thing. The concept wasn't even on my radar.

But ever since that conversation, I've thought of "getting little" as a kind of spiritual invitation... a way to connect with our younger and more imaginative and authentic selves.

When *I* get little, I'm going to delight as I learn to read...

When I get little, I will blow the dandelion seeds without thinking of the hundreds of weeds that will pop up in the yard a few days later.
When I get little, I'm going snuggle into my massive pile of stuffies as I fall asleep at night, not thinking about the long list of troubles in the world.

I'm sure you have your own list of things you'll do when you "get little."

Yet, just like we don't physically "get little," we also don't physically get "reborn."

Jesus reminds Nicodemus that he will *not* fly back into his mother's womb. That's not what he means when he says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Jesus uses the term "born from above" as a metaphor for spiritual transformation. An invitation to a new kind of birth by the Spirit through baptism.

Birth is not literal here, but it *is* spiritually powerful.

And I think Jesus' use of the birth metaphor is important to pay attention to.

Physical birth—mother to child—is messy, dangerous, and sacred.

Jesus knows this when he uses the metaphor.

Jesus came to earth via physical birth—the messy, dangerous and sacred kind—from his earthly mother Mary. And by using birth as a guiding metaphor in this passage, Jesus makes a bold statement about the power of Incarnation.

-

He also uses a feminine image for God here. Sometimes we don't pay attention to that part.

New Testament scholar and Catholic Sister, Sandra Schneiders writes: "Christians have, for centuries, read this passage without realizing that the Fourth Evangelist here supplies us, through the voice of Jesus, with one of the clearest New Testament images of the femininity of God. The Spirit is the one of whom we are

born spiritually in the waters of baptism, just as we are born physically of our mothers in the waters of natural birth.”¹(122).

There’s something profound about this story of two men, cloaked in the night, considering a feminine metaphor for God.

The messy, dangerous, and sacred transformation that unfolds when a mother births a child into the world.

Jesus’ use of the birth metaphor—shows that Jesus didn’t limit God to masculine understanding, even though, as Schneiders reminds us, “The biblical presentation of God as feminine has been virtually suppressed by the male religious establishment...”²

Literal Birth—from a mother’s womb—is a big part of the Jesus story. We anticipate the birth of Christ in the Advent season... and we look to the Mary as she says “yes” to her terrifying call to be the earthly mother of Jesus.

The birth story of Jesus, like many of our own birth stories, is not a quaint and quiet story of femininity.

Mary answered with guts and praise when she said:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior (Lk 1:46)

Mary answered with a call to justice when she said:

He [God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
And lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And sent the rich away empty. (Lk 1:52-53)

¹ Sandra Marie Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*. Rev. and expanded (New York: Crossroad Pub, 2003), 122.

² Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe*, 123.

Jesus uses the metaphor of birth to draw Nicodemus into a powerful understanding of God's love and spiritual transformation.

And Nicodemus absolutely doesn't get it. He doesn't understand.

By the end of their two-way conversation, in verse 10, there is no resolution. Jesus says, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" (3:10)

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night with his questions; and he doesn't leave with easy answers or understanding.

The story in John's gospel continues in verse 11, but Jesus shifts from speaking directly to Nicodemus to YOU (plural) indicating a wider audience for his message.

For our interpretive purposes, I think the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus—two men by night—ends with verse 10... when Jesus says: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" (Jn 3:10)

It ends with misunderstanding.

But before we give up on Nicodemus, let's remember that this is not the whole story.

Lent is a long season. The story of Nicodemus by night calls us into a season of asking hard questions... of listening for answers that are not always clear right away...

The message that Jesus delivers to Nicodemus that night, and I think to all of us, takes time. It takes courage. And like birth, it is messy, dangerous, *and* sacred.

Let's not forget that Nicodemus shows up later in John's gospel, at the foot of the cross after Jesus' crucifixion; this time, he comes **by day**, with myrrh and aloe to prepare his body for burial... in a garden.

What questions do you bring to Jesus by night?

Are they the same questions you'd ask by day, or is there something different about night?

For me, night is a time with more silence... more time to reflect... and often, yes, more time to lean in to fear and anxiety.

It's been a crushing week in our community.

Last Sunday, many of us gathered here to learn how we might provide better support to our immigrant neighbors living in fear and separation right now.

Little did we know that, 36 hours later, our fellow Alaskan, Sonia Espinoza Arriaga and her three children would be detained by ICE. This was the first known case of young children being detained in Alaska, and the cruelty of it runs so counter to our understanding of our call to love God and love neighbor.

By night on Tuesday, Sonia's eldest son had been separated from his mom and brother and sat alone in a cell of the Anchorage Jail. By the next day, Sonia and the two younger sons had been escorted into Mexico, and her eldest son still sat alone in his cell of the Anchorage jail.

It's hard to make any sense out of this kind of human cruelty. And it's hard to believe that we live in a society where it's okay to detain children and break up families.

By night this week, I admit that most of my questions turned into scrolling through news articles, probing the internet sphere for any sign of Good News.

In times of societal upheaval, I often find it helpful to turn to the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for wisdom. He had a way of approaching God in the long night... and carrying on, despite every insurmountable obstacle in front of him. His famous work for justice flowed from his identity as a Jesus follower.

Over the past week, a question buzzed in my mind:
What would Dr. King preach about our unfolding crisis in America now? In our America that detains kindergartners?

In my search, I discovered that, in 1954, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. preached on this gospel passage as the new pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist

Church in Montgomery, Alabama. At this point in his life, he was fresh from graduate school in Boston...and had so much earthly work for justice left to do in his lifetime.

For historical context, King's 1954 sermon was delivered just a few months after the *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling that stated it was unconstitutional to separate children in public schools on the basis of race...but progress toward racial justice was so slow, and every tiny bit of progress was hard-earned. King's famed *Letter from Birmingham Jail* wouldn't be drafted for another eight years.

In his sermon notes for that day in 1954, King wrote:

“Civilizations might rise and fall, but God[‘s] love will be here. Empires might crumble and perish, but God’s love will be here. Even [though] there might be a day when the stars cease to bedeck the heavens, but the love of God will be here. Man’s love might waver and even dry up, but God’s love will be here. God’s love is eternal.”³

Friends, we are people of hope... and like Nicodemus, we can’t always see a clear path, but in our questions and our prayers and our persistence, we can move forward together because **God’s love is here... and will be here.**

In this gospel passage for today, I hear a call to bring our questions to God by night... To hold the image of a mother birthing a child—in all its messy, dangerous, and sacred unfolding... as we navigate a way forward that demands the dignity of *all* human beings.

Insisting that: **God’s love is here... and will be here.**

King concluded his sermon that day by pointing to the Cross. He wrote: “The scene on Calvary is more than a meaningless drama that took place on an earthly stage, but it is a telescope through which we look out into the long vista of eternity and see the love of God breaking forth into time.”⁴

³ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/gods-love-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

⁴ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/gods-love-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

King didn't mention Nicodemus by name in this sermon, but this flash to the Cross calls to mind the scene toward the end of John's gospel when Nicodemus, **by day**, arrives to receive Jesus' body and prepare it for burial.

We don't learn whether Nicodemus found answers for all the questions he brought to Jesus by night, but his presence—by day—at the foot of the cross, seems a sure sign that he has understood and been transformed by God's love.

God's love that is here... and will be here.

It's a love that breaks forth into time... even when nights are long, and sparks of resurrection feel far off.

That is the good news of our faith.

Amen.