

# Look Up

Jesus, Nicodemus, and the very mercy of God

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Lent 2A  
John 3:1-17  
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There's something hinky going on here. Jesus and Nicodemus and this late night visit. And how each of us comes to see this moment speaks to how much we trust in Jesus and how much we trust in our own experience.

Who is this man, and why does Jesus give him such a hard time?

This is a provocative story. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a big wig, comes to Jesus in the middle of the night to ask him a question.

Already alarm bells are going off in our brains. Pharisee. The people Jesus gives a hard time to.

And he comes to Jesus at night. That's weird. Under the cover of darkness? Because he doesn't want to be seen? Is he embarrassed? Concerned for his reputation? For his safety?

Who does he think Jesus is? What does he think Jesus is up to? Why seek answers from him when he is one of the teachers himself?

And Jesus is hard on him, but not completely dismissive. In fact, as the story continues, Jesus seems to forget he's talking to Nicodemus and the narrative seems to wander off. Finished with him and his nocturnal wonderings and wanderings.

## A Punny Exchange

As odd and curious as the circumstances of this encounter are, they pale next to the exchange itself. It begins

with an odd question and an odder response. Jesus says "born from above" and Nicodemus asks about being "born again."

This is all a semantic balancing act along a single word which translates two ways. It can be either "born from above" or "born again". So this whole exchange is about a natural confusion, not a logistical one. Jesus uses a word which could have radically different meanings depending on which one he meant.

**Jesus says something to Nicodemus that doesn't make sense either way.**

There should be no surprise when he doesn't get it. When he guesses wrong. Asks a question which may look dumb to us, but wasn't to him. Both concepts are wack. Born from above or a second time? Either way, we're talking a miracle.

Of course, the thing about either birth is that we don't get a say in our being born. In any way. Both are God's doing. And both are reflections of God's love for us.

Even today, when many Christian brothers and sisters speak to being "born again" they are speaking to something God has done for them. To change the very course of their lives.

## Both/And

Even more disorienting is that Jesus then makes the case for both. As if his challenging, double-meaning word was not only intentional, but used to communicate both views at the same time.

That Jesus is speaking to both the heavenly and earthly; the divine and the human. Born from above and again in the flesh. Like our own baptisms: spiritual and physical, outward and inward, with water and oil. We are changed, transfigured, made new in the Spirit. In love with the divine and loved by all of her.

Lifted up, naked to be robed in white, soaked to be dried, forgiven to be loved.

This is why our eyes turn to the heavens, above us to see the divine one crucified, lifted like Moses lifted the serpent to heal the people of the snake venom. Moses lifts the snake toward the sky and God saves the people.

Jesus is the antidote to the venom of sin. The poison which would consume us, flood our veins, race to its destination: the heart. To seize it, overrun it, consume it from inside, like a trojan horse.

The cross is a gruesome distortion of power and safety. It condemns the militant, the insurrectionist on a spike, lifts them high into the air to save us from the contagion. Of violence and disorder; revolution and independence; of political freedom.

The one on the cross, scapegoat crucified, sacrificed at the altar of protection from a vengeful God.

But when we look up into the air, to the cross, the gruesome sight of torture and vengeful fear, we see reflected, not safety in a villain's death, but safety in spite of it. We see love in spite of torture and hatred and violence. The picture proves how **undeserving** we are of God's mercy, devotion, and love.

If we look up and if we can see it, through tears of pain and horror, confused, we can see something else. We can see a God who would show mercy, even in this. Even when we put the Son there. Our messiah, our savior and liberator. Mercy, even after this.

Nothing can keep us from the love of God.

## Mercy

What happens next for Nicodemus is a mystery. He disappears as Jesus goes off on his familiar sermon.

But he makes two more appearances. Once in chapter 7 to encourage the other leaders to be fair to Jesus. And again in 19, when he helps Joseph of Arimathea embalm and bury Jesus.

There is no consensus among scholars about what this means. Because there isn't enough to go on. But I think he becomes a disciple. That's how we know his name. Why we see him in these different ways. A man afraid to be seen with Jesus, and in the end, tending to his lifeless body. Away from him in life, but with him in death.

Like the one who comes after the party is over. As we're taking the streamers down and putting the food away. He's missed the games and all the festivity. The newlyweds have gone or the graduate is off to another graduation party. But he came. Walking up to the garage, to the tables with bowls scraped of food.

The party's over. The food devoured, but he's not that hungry anyway. But we fix a plate from what remains, and he finds a seat in a folding chair with the stragglers, the few at the end. Well, just the one. And the mother. An aunt. And a friend, Mary, so close she could be a sister.

And when the man finishes, he drops his plate into the gathered trash bag and helps clean up. Never too late to receive mercy. Never too late to love him.