

God of signs and wonders, we come to your word again, seeing understanding and the new life it offers. By the power of the Holy Spirit illumine our hearts and minds so that we may believe this good news and have here-and-now eternal life. In the name of Jesus Christ, our teacher and Savior. Amen.

Genesis 12:1-4a

12:1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

12:2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

12:3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

12:4a So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

John 3:1-17

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

3:2 He came to Jesus 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 apart from the presence of God."

3:3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

3:4 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?"

3:5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

3:6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'

3:8 The wind 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."

3:9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

3:10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

3:11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony.

3:12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

3:13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

3:14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

3:15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

3:16 "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.

3:17 "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.

Proclamation of the Word

Life in Clemson is built around seasons: football season, baseball season, lake season.
In South Carolina we can experience all the seasons in a week- winter, spring summer and fall.
Right now we are living through a season as a nation- the political primaries.
And in an election year, there are plenty of debates.
Our text today is a debate between Jesus and Nicodemus, but it is also so much more.

Most candidates tell us how they plan to make things better, to change.
CHANGE is always a key word in a political season.

This is the situation we find in today's passage of Holy Scripture.
People sense that the **winds of Change are blowing**.
Something that can only be described as a movement is afoot.
These believers of Jesus tell about how God is changing them and others.
In our text today, Jesus encounters a man in the cover of darkness- a man seeking to find something- to understand- perhaps seeking change.
Nicodemus notices that something is happening.
He wants to get close to it, to be a part of it... **maybe**.

Nicodemus is a seeker who comes to Jesus in the NIGHT. (Nick at night)
Nicodemus is unwilling to meet Jesus in the light of day.
You see, Nicodemus is a "man of the cloth", an official insider, a church official, a Pharisee. He has a Master of Divinity degree and credentials.
So he comes under the cover of darkness; otherwise, what might others think?
They may think that he is seriously considering that Jesus may be the Son of God.
I have to give Nicodemus credit- at least he comes to find out for himself.
He brings his questions and his curiosity.

But there is another meaning at play here;
Nicodemus is the one who is in the dark- a metaphor used in John's gospel to mean "separated from God."
He knows all the right behaviors, speaks the language of faith, but something real and alive is missing from his faith.
He is fumbling around in the darkness.
I feel for Nicodemus.
It is terrible to feel God's absence or even worse, God-forsaken.

I have stumbled around in the dark, too.
Perhaps you have, as well.

For some of us, everything appears to be right- you have the right job, the right credentials, are a good church-goer, have been given family or friends who make life full and better, but something is missing. Or perhaps life is not so shiny on the outside, and you know you need something bigger than yourself. I think Nicodemus knew there was something missing. There had to be more to life.

In contrast to this story of Nicodemus and Jesus, our first Scripture reading is about our ancestor Abram, who is considered along with Sarai, our great-grandparents in the faith.

Abram and Sarai's faith and God's work through them began the world's most prominent religious movements.

Abram, like Nicodemus, has a conversation with God Almighty, too.

In contrast to Nicodemus, Abram and Sarai react to the promise and venture out in faith- trusting God with everything- their entire lives. And the result is blessing.

I would love to think we could all be like Abram and Sarai, they simply followed in faith.

My guess is that lots of times you and I are more like Nicodemus.

Nicodemus brings his questions.

He knows that something special is going on, but he cannot get beyond that.

He never really "gets" what Jesus is saying here.

He comes to ask questions and expects rational, logical reasons for what he is seeing happen.

In other words, Nicodemus tries to debate Jesus, and Jesus goes after him. In the early service I spoke with someone who said they do not like when Jesus does this in several places in Scripture. We wondered if like a really good teacher, Jesus is pushing and challenging Nicodemus in love.

Jesus offers something different, something that goes beyond knowledge to **trust**.

Nicodemus has seen the proof of the signs that Jesus has done,

but cannot seem to make himself **trust**.

Belief in the gospel of John is about a trusting relationship with Jesus, God made flesh.

But what about what Jesus says about being *born from above* or *being born of the Spirit*?

When Nicodemus asks how one can be born again or how one can enter again into a mother's womb and be born, Jesus says,

"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." (John 3:5)

A Spiritual rebirth is the opposite of living in darkness.

It is a life lived in connection to the very presence of God.

Unfortunately, Nicodemus still doesn't get it.

He cannot reach the presence of God through his logical argument or even by doing good things, the right things;

he can only receive the gift of faith.

But maybe the crux of the problem for Nicodemus is revealed in his words,

"How can anyone be born **after having grown old?**" Did you hear that?

It is said, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

Maybe Nicodemus thinks he cannot change. Perhaps he feels too old to change.

Or maybe he has a lot to lose- security, status, and a sense of self. Change???

Abram and Sarai are older, too, when they set out into unfamiliar territory.

I used to read this so flippantly as if Abram just picked up and left home, like he went off to college, but they are old.

They have much to lose. One scholar suggests that in a kinship culture, to leave kindred, country, and his father's house was to lose everything.

He did not have a Master's degree like Nicodemus, but Abram's father, Terah, was successful and wealthy in that nomadic culture.

And Abram was leaving his family name- his inheritance to go on faith.

The LORD would make his name great, but Abram had to begin again, start over.

God's transforming love and relationship changes us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes we have to hit reset and start over.

It is part of Discipleship Basic Training.

Otherwise, how will we learn to trust in faith, to believe?

To go on faith, means we leave something behind, let go of old habits, hard and fast prejudices, or comforts.

But faith is the security we need to change.

Sometimes when our college aged children come home, they do things they did as children, like climb in bed between Chuck and me before we go to sleep.

We talk and laugh like when they were little.

Hallie likes to come sit on our laps like a baby.

As we grow, sometimes we want to crawl back to that place of innocence and security, but it is **that trusting relationship** that gives us the courage to grow, to mature.

We can see the world anew.

We gain the insight of faith.

We can be reformed or re-made to love more, forgive better, welcome one another better.

We let go of old ways of understanding and gain a faith that seeks to understand.

Our hearts and minds expand.

The generous grace and love of God, makes us generous, loving, kind.

Ann Landers, now deceased, was a popular columnist who answers questions in the newspapers. One day this letter actually ran in the newspapers. I think you might recognize who wrote it. It may have been Nicodemus.

Dear Ann: I am not a religious man. In fact, I consider myself an atheist. I am also very ethical and have high moral standards. I donate to more than a dozen charities. I am kind to animals, children, and the environment. I would never raise my hand to my wife or children, and I treat them as the precious people they are. I strive to make the world a better place and understand those different from myself. I am intelligent and kind, and stand up for what I believe. I never impose my beliefs on those around me. So, why is it that as soon as people find out I don't believe in God, they tell me I am going to hell? One woman said, "You cannot possibly have good morals if you don't believe." This is nonsense. I know plenty of "God-fearing, church-going folk" who have rotten moral standards. I am sick and tired of people making moral judgments about me based solely on the fact that I do not believe in religion. How can I get these well-meaning but ignorant people off my back?

Signed: Unbeliever in Marylandⁱ

Another pastor, Dena Williams, writes her response to this Nicodemus.

Dear Unbelieving Friend,

You sound a lot like someone else I know, a man named Nicodemus. Oh, Nicodemus was a religious person, in every sense of the word. He went to the synagogue, kept the laws, and was a believer. That is not what you have in common with him. Nicodemus, though, also lived an upright life: he was kind and responsible, intelligent and thoughtful. He was as comfortable with his life as you seem to be with yours.

Yet Nicodemus seemed to know there was something missing. When a new prophet, preaching a message of love and forgiveness came to town, Nicodemus realized he was searching. He was searching for the presence of God in his life. He went by night, anonymously, to see Jesus.

You have come anonymously as well. I wonder if you, too, are seeking God's presence. I wonder if you are seeking love and forgiveness. Do you, too, sense something missing in your life? The language you use to describe yourself is telling: you say that you are "sick and tired."

There is good news for you. It is the same good news that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus. It is the good news of life, born of water and spirit, life for Nicodemus, life for you, life for all people. The good news for all of us is that God is present in our lives, bidden or unbidden, God is present.

Your friend, Denaⁱⁱ

Nicodemus slinks off into the night after that encounter with Jesus, but that is not the end of the story. Hear the good news! whatever or wherever we are now, this is not the end of the story.

If we were to keep reading the gospel of John Nicodemus shows up two more times.

In Chapter 7:40-53 when the Pharisees and priests discuss arresting Jesus.

When the leaders begin to argue, it is Nicodemus who speaks up for Jesus.

He states, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing?"

and they suspect that Nicodemus is under Jesus' spell.

But Nicodemus does not fully come out into the light of day until the day of Jesus' painful crucifixion after being condemned a criminal.

It is Nicodemus who comes out that afternoon before dark and assists Joseph of Arimathea with preparing the body of Jesus.

It is Nicodemus who brings the mixture myrrh and aloes weighing a hundred pounds- a very generous gift.

And they place Jesus in a proper tomb before sundown as was the Jewish custom. (see John 19:38-42).

Nicodemus is living in relationship Jesus, the Light of the World.

Once lost, he is found.

Once blind, he can now see.

God has spoken a world of love and salvation to the entire world—his name is Jesus.

Secure in that love, we can start over, begin anew, hit reset.

ⁱ Ann Landers, The Denver Post, February 22, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Dena Williams, excerpt from *Lectionary Homiletics*, February 17, 2008. Dena serves King of Glory Lutheran Church, Arvada, Colorado. This is her creative response to the Ann Landers column.