

John 3:1-17 – Lent 2 – You Must be Born Again – March 1, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

We are still just getting started in Lent. I hope your disciplines—your fasts—are going well. If they are not—or if they never started—begin anew today. No guilt—well, not very much—but let's get going. Remember that Lent is 40 days. You still have time. This is our moment to draw near to Christ.

So far, we have emphasized the Lenten disciplines of fasting, Scripture, and a quiet schedule. I want to add another discipline to your Lenten season, and really, to your whole life.

If you have been reading the three-year Bible plan with us, you will have spent some time with Psalm 51 this week. I love this Psalm. Read the whole thing this afternoon if it is not fresh in your mind. It won't take long. It is a rich treasure of life before God. Really, it is what Lent is all about.

I have four specific verses in mind from Psalm 51. And these words make it into our offertory. Here, David prays, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

This year, in Lent, I invite you to embrace *a willing spirit* before God. His desire for us is to have a clean heart, a broken spirit, a contrite heart before Him. Not defeated, or depressed, or discouraged, but deferential. Not stubborn, or defiant, or indifferent, but willing.

And maybe we can even put our own hearts to the test by our reaction to the Lenten season—and its disciplines. If we just cast Lent aside and live however we please between Sundays, something may be amiss in our hearts.

The proper posture for us is to crave a rich desire for renewal, a fresh sense of God's real presence, and a deeper purification of life. And the focus here is on the inner life—the secret heart—what we are deep down inside. Please know, God will never merely save our souls from hell. He intends *to heal* our souls. And let's not resist that work.

I think a willing spirit is one of the things missing in Nicodemus in our Gospel reading today. Although he comes to Jesus with more openness than many of the Pharisees, but he still resists the purposes of Jesus—and that's where the whole discourse begins.

John 2 ends with these words, “Now when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in *man*.”

And then John 3, our reading today, begins with, “Now there was a *man* of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.” Jesus knows the *man*, Nicodemus. Not that they had spoken. Rather, Jesus knows the secrets of his heart. Jesus knows his theology, his philosophy, his manner of life. He knows his sin, his pride, his self-

satisfaction. He understands the objections that Nicodemus brings to the kingdom of God. He knows such things about you, too. We can't hide from Him.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He is a member of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish Council. He is well-respected in his community as a teacher—a rabbi. But here, he comes to Jesus. He desires a conversation with Jesus. It is probably the cleansing of the temple in chapter two that caught his attention. Not everyone was terribly happy with Jesus at this moment.

But with Nicodemus, there is this interesting mixture of curiosity, courage, and timidity in his visit. He comes to Jesus by night. This may mean he is merely seeking privacy. He doesn't want his fellow Pharisees to know about his visit with Jesus. He might even worry that the temple authorities would see him as a collaborator.

But night is also likely a theological symbol. It expresses his spiritual relationship to Jesus—and to the truth. John often uses the terminology of darkness to reveal error, unbelief, arrogance, and even foolishness. Just beyond our reading, in John 3:20, Jesus says, "For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."

Nicodemus is from Jerusalem. He is a theological insider. He is adept at spiritual things. And yet, he can't comprehend the ways of Jesus. He thinks he is wise. No one will convince him otherwise. But Nicodemus doesn't have a willing heart—not just yet.

And we can see this in that he doesn't begin with a question. He calls Jesus a teacher—He is a Rabbi from God. He even admits that Jesus' signs—His miracles—are significant. And then he stops. His arrogance—his superior position—keep him from asking the hundreds of questions that spring to mind for me.

Think about this opportunity. Think about the questions he could ask. Keep in mind Nicodemus' theological education and his quick mind. He is the teacher of Israel as Jesus Himself says. Nicodemus could have started with the ground he had already covered. Why did You turn water into wine? Where did you train to become a Rabbi? Why did you create such chaos in the temple grounds? And then all of the big theological questions we should all be asking.

Now, Jesus will help him along. He will help Nicodemus to ask the right questions. In fact, there are three questions that he will ask because of Jesus. And so, Jesus ignores Nicodemus' compliments—if indeed that is what they are. And Jesus' response is unexpected. He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

What a powerful statement. It reveals a fundamental need for every human being. And it reveals that Nicodemus' heart is still full of darkness—even though he is a good man by the world's standards. His heart is not broken and contrite before God—it is not willing—not yet, anyway.

His first two questions come together, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" And his final question is this, "How can these things be?"

Nicodemus' misunderstanding of Jesus is quite ironic. He is a Pharisee. He is the teacher of Israel. But he is out of his depth—and he doesn't even realize it. He doesn't understand Jesus—even though the Israelites had been awaiting the Christ for centuries.

These things are spiritually discerned. Really, the Holy Spirit is necessary for us to even see ourselves aright. The notion in this—and so many of the other discourses we find in John’s Gospel—is that unless some deficit is met—deeper penetration of the Word of God is impossible.

There is an invincible ignorance among some of Jesus’ hearers. They can’t listen. They won’t listen. They have ideas that are so fixed in their heads, that making room for the ideas of Jesus just isn’t possible. And we are left wondering if that will be true for Nicodemus—and if that will be true for us.

Interestingly, Jesus tells us the answer in His opening statement. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Jesus speaks of regeneration. He is driving at something comprehensive—a complete renewal of the whole person—from inside out.

This is why David’s language in Psalm 51 is so important for us. He calls upon God to “create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” This is exactly the same verb that we hear in Genesis, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” It takes just such an act of God—creation out of nothing—by His spoken Word—that makes all the difference—for this interior change.

It is also no mistake that Jesus goes right to Holy Baptism as just such an act. We must be born again—born from above—of water and the Spirit. Remember creation again. I just quoted Genesis 1:1. Here is Genesis 1:2, “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” And into this darkness, the Word of God speaks creation into existence. That’s what Nicodemus needs. And that’s what we need too.

Holy Baptism begins our re-creation. God grants us new and contrite hearts—willing hearts—through the Word and Holy Spirit—in the Church—and in our spiritual disciplines. And I want you to embrace that work as God’s highest good. God is healing our souls—right here—right now—if we will simply listen—if we will simply receive His work.

The other option is to resist that work. We can tune out. We can live by the dictates of the world. We can go right back to our arrogance and pride and foolishness—invincible ignorance. Jesus confronts Nicodemus with these words, “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.”

Just a couple of verses beyond our reading, Jesus says, “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.”

And that’s what I want us to avoid in this Lenten season. We can reject Jesus’ testimony. We can think we know better. We can be so impressed with our own minds, wit, and actions, that we cannot see Jesus at all. We can’t see the way He has prepared for us. We can easily slide back into our hardness of heart.

But Jesus invites us to have willing hearts. Humble hearts. Broken and contrite hearts—confessing our sins—and spiritual limitations—with a renewed openness to His heavenly things. He even produces that willingness in us.

Now, I realize we didn't get very far into our text today. There is so much more here. Jesus is lifted up on the cross—like the snake on a pole during the wilderness wanderings in Numbers. And this becomes the way He draws us to Himself. We didn't even talk about John 3:16. We didn't get into the difference between earthly things and heavenly things. Thankfully this text comes around again every three years. There are infinite number of things to explore because it is God's infinite Word.

And it is important to know that Nicodemus did come to have a willing spirit—a contrite heart. We see him again in the passion story. He makes another visit to Jesus in the night. He is still afraid, but he overcomes that fear. It is two Pharisees—of all people—that bury Jesus after the crucifixion. And this means there is hope for us too.

“After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.”

Lent is our time to draw near to Christ. It is our time to have a contrite and willing heart before Him. Romans 12 gets at the kind of renewal of the heart I am talking about today. It picks up on the sacrificial language of Psalm 51. It uses the language of Holy Baptism in John 3—regeneration and renewal. And it leaves us in a humble and open place before God. Let me conclude the sermon today with this text.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+