

**OPENER:**

Good morning and welcome to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Week of Lent. This week we have changed locales; last week, we were in the wilderness, being tempted by the devil, this week we have entered the darkness.

So many of the most important Gospel scenes happen at night; Jesus' birth, the agony in the Garden, and even Jesus's death, all occur when the lights go out.<sup>1</sup> Our Gospel today features another one, with this episode of "Nick at Night."

So, again, welcome to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Week of Lent and "Welcome to the night"—where Jesus continues to show us that he is willing to go wherever in order to be with us.

The old saying goes that there are three rules in life. They are:

- 1) Never get into a poker game with a someone named "Doc", and
- 2) Never get into a fight with a guy named "Tiny" and
- 3) Never engage in a rabbinical style argument about theology, with a guy named "Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

Nicodemus breaks the 3<sup>rd</sup> rule, but also the 1<sup>st</sup>, in our Gospel story, as he is willing to engage Jesus in a night-time game of high-stakes, "No-Limit" Texas Hold 'Em.

**"ALL- IN":**

You have probably noticed, over the last year or so, that here at Good Shepherd we have used the phrase "All In" to describe various efforts going on in our parish life. We used it formally for our Annual Pledge Gathering, taking pictures with the various ministry groups declaring that that group was "All In." We also have used it informally when talking about our community together and the work of the Holy Spirit happening around us. Like all good slogans, it has kind of taken on a life of its own, with meanings maybe yet to come.

At some point, I remember remarking to Christine that here we were, a church, using a gambling phrase as our recurring theme.

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick. 1977. *Telling the Truth: the Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Nelson Algren's original list in his 1956 novel, *A Walk on the Wild Side*.

For the unfamiliar, going “All In” in poker is “the moment when a player—whether out of bravado, recklessness, or desperation—bets all of his or her chips on a single hand.”<sup>3</sup>

## **NICODEMUS**

Nicodemus, from our Gospel reading today, is decidedly not “ALL IN.” Nicodemus is a hedger of bets, not willing to go “All In”—while open to the possibilities that Jesus offers.

In poker parlance, Nicodemus agrees to meet in a seedy backroom, behind closed doors, at an underground game away from the authorities. While engaging in this secret meeting, Nicodemus holds back by not putting his chips all in, he has not folded or left the table, but rather he keeps:

checking the bet,

biding his time,

lurking in the shadows to see what will happen next.

“Nick at Night” comes to Jesus for answers, but hesitantly, in stops and starts.

In doing so, Nicodemus reveals to us a model of discipleship that looks so human and realistic, because it looks so much like you and me.

## **DISCIPLESHIP:**

John’s Gospel highlights Nicodemus’ mediocrity by placing his story right after the one where Jesus cleanses the Temple, a story which itself is right after the Wedding at Cana. Thus the writer of the Gospel has arranged in a neat row, a positive case of faith and discipleship, followed by a negative one, and then ours, which is somewhere in the middle.<sup>4</sup>

The disciples at Cana go “All In.”

Jesus’ enemies refuse to play.

Nicodemus is in between.

He is in the middle, lurking, waiting, and watching.

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Crouch “Going All In on ‘All In’” *The New Yorker* (September 7, 2015)

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/going-all-in-on-all-in>

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Raymond. 2008. *The Gospel according to John (I-XII)*. (Volume 1) New Haven: Yale University Press. 235

The reasons that Nicodemus does this are probably that he did not want his compatriots to know that he was meeting with Jesus. As a respected and learned member of his community, it would be against his interests to follow this dangerous radical preaching a new message.

But it's also deeper than that for him, and for us:

“Men like Nicodemus have identified themselves with definitions they know too exactly. They want someone new to confirm a notion already fixed inside the heads of those who know best. For them revelation has become, quite unconsciously, a kind of technology” which they wield like a blunt object.<sup>5</sup>

Nicodemus wants to fit Jesus into the comfortable box that he has created for him, he wants to go only so far.

Nicodemus tries to bet around the edges, tries to flatter Jesus with a honorary but insufficient title.

But Jesus keeps raising the stakes, replying with this uncomfortable language about “being born from above.”

## **LENTEN JOURNEY:**

How do we do that?

What can Nicodemus and Jesus' exchange teach us, here in 2020, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent?

How do enter in from the darkness, pass through the twilight, and into the light?

Particularly, in this moment, a moment of unprecedented fear; fear seems to surround us and envelop us and thus consume us.

We must hear this statement: “to be born again” as an invitation rather than a command. Since it is asking us to do something we cannot do by ourselves, it's a reminder that we need God. We will never be able to conquer, not to mention handle, our fears alone.

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Moloney, Francis J. 1998. *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina) Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 91, Bishop, J. “Encounters in the New Testament” in Gros Louis, Kenneth R. R., James Stokes Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warshaw, eds. 1982. *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon. 2:292

Nicodemus would have preferred to have done it on his own. But God is ready to do the hard, sweaty work of labor for us. In that way: “Rebirth is God’s gift to give.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, we must realize and recognize the reality about who God is. Ultimately, and to return to our metaphor, Jesus holds all the best cards, we as the audience know that in this story, but it’s not so easy in our daily lives. We equivocate, we pretend like we can do it on our own, we nibble around the edges. We are fearful.

We should know that Jesus has the Ace of Spades (John 3.16) “the gospel in miniature” in his hands, offering it to us as a lifeline and as comfort.

Nicodemus, in turn, has the Dead Man’s Hand, he thinks that he has a good set of cards but he does not realize that he has to lose it all, to die, to become like a child, to be born again, to be born above, in order to come into the light.

## **CONCLUSION**

So, in this Lenten Season, I invite you to think about ways that you can be ALL IN, in your relationship with God. To recognize our fear of the dark, to acknowledge it, but to look for and come towards the light.

In the end, John’s Gospel offers a word of Grace with our friend Nicodemus. Nicodemus ultimately comes around in the end. The writer goes out of his way to mention that Nicodemus was there after Jesus was crucified, he joined with Joseph of Arimathea to help anoint Christ’ body and prepare the tomb.<sup>7</sup>

A secret disciple no longer, at the end of the Gospel,  
he moves all the chips in,  
and he does so in the daylight,

May we be like him.

**AMEN**

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<sup>6</sup> Deborah J. Kapp “Pastoral Perspective” in Bartlett, David Lyon and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. 2015. *Feasting on the Word*. (Year A, Volume 2). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, Kapp, 72

<sup>7</sup> John 19.38-42 (also 7:50-52)