

## First Sunday in Lent - March 9, 2025

Ezekiel 37:1–14; Psalm 49:1–2, 5–15; Ephesians 1:15–21; John 3:1–8

### “Secrets at night”

1. In this digital era, passwords are very important both to protect and to unlock what is being protected
  - a. Experts discourage us from having the same password for everything
    - i. If someone somehow figures out your password to both your email and your bank account is “Abc123!,” well, you’d be in serious trouble
    - ii. So then the challenge is remembering what all those different passwords are
  - b. To keep our passwords safe, there are some strategies
    - i. Some people write down their passwords and keep them in a safe place
    - ii. Some use digital password managers
      1. It can be an app on your phone or computer
      2. Sometimes it can be an add on to a browser
  - c. I was concerned about keeping all my digital tickets secure when I took my sabbatical trip to Europe in 2023
    - i. I felt so sophisticated having all my apps on my cell phone with tickets to British Airways, French fast trains, and Scottish ferries
    - ii. And then I thought- what if I lose my phone or it’s stolen? Panic!
  - d. I developed a convoluted plan to be able to have my phone backed up, and, if stolen, I planned to buy a phone just like mine abroad, and restore all the data.
    - i. The trick involved hiding a recovery code on cloud storage, which I could get to without needing my cell phone to verify it was me.
    - ii. It never came to that extreme a point, but let me tell you, it was stressful when I realized how hard it was for me to keep some things secret (password protected) and yet accessible to me
2. For the season of Lent this year, the Bible passages which we will read seem to have a common theme of things “hidden” or “secret” which are being revealed
  - a. On Ash Wednesday, we heard about prayers being raised and alms given in secret
  - b. In coming Sundays we will hear stories about abundance hiding in plain sight, about hidden opportunities to serve, about going into hiding for three days, and more
  - c. Today’s passage happens at night, already a clue that this was meant as a secret exchange, what was happening wasn’t meant to be “out in the open”
    - i. We learn that Nicodemus is a leader, a part of the establishment of the Jewish community of faith
    - ii. He was, in fact, a Pharisee and a member of an important ruling council, the Sanhedrin
    - iii. From what he says to Jesus, we can assume he had either witnessed or heard about signs performed by Jesus
      1. In this gospel, the first miracle was Jesus turning water into wine

2. but also interestingly there was the turning over of the tables, the cleaning of the temple in Jerusalem, which in this Gospel of John happens at the beginning (whereas in the other ones comes at the end)
- iv. What it means is that as Jesus was starting his ministry, he was quickly becoming known as special because of his miracles, and in circles of those in power, he was already being seen as threatening to the establishment.
- v. We see that Nicodemus is intrigued about Jesus and wants to find out more about him, but Nicodemus doesn't feel comfortable approaching Jesus in a open, public setting
- vi. So Nicodemus comes at night, so he won't be noticed by his colleagues
- d. Some scholars see Nicodemus as a representative of a larger audience for the original Gospel
  - i. He is seen as the type of person who had heard about Jesus and was not quite ready to make up their minds about Jesus, in a way seen as riding the fence between being against and being for him
  - ii. The Gospel writer is encouraging throughout the narrative for the audience to believe that God had sent Jesus. The writer reveals the secret on the next to last chapter:
  - iii. *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. John 20:30-31*
  - iv. Spoiler alert: Nicodemus appears a couple more times in the gospel, and at the end he outs himself as someone ready to be a follower of Jesus because he brings the burial spices for Jesus after his crucifixion
- e. But back to this moment in the night.
  - i. There are two sets of secrets in play
  - ii. First is the one we just referred to: Nicodemus doesn't want to out himself as being interested in wanting to know more about or follow Jesus
  - iii. The second secret is the coded information Jesus gives Nicodemus about experiencing the majesty of God
  - iv. Think of it like a password to unlock the knowledge Nicodemus was after
    1. Nicodemus calls Jesus a "Rabbi... from God" because of his powerful signs
    2. Jesus gives a weird, coded reply "Truly, truly, I tell you, without being birthed again—that is being birthed from above, no one can see the majesty of God."
    3. That's where we get the notion of "born again"
    4. When Nicodemus takes this literally and wonders how to physically do that, Jesus replies that it is a spiritual rebirthing

5. So the password / point of entry to the next level of relationship which Nicodemus wanted to have with Jesus involved the Holy Spirit, this divine lifeforce which is free, unpredictable and powerful
6. Nicodemus, and those in the original audience like him, were being nudged by Jesus to be open to that unpredictable Spirit,
  - a. to open their senses not just to the new teaching of Jesus,
  - b. but also to be able to interpret it as a brand new beginning which God was ushering in, this majesty of God's real
3. Lent is inviting us this year to consider what message Jesus is unlocking / unveiling for us
  - a. In these 40 days, Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem, with the burden of knowing it would lead to a tragic ending, yet with the knowledge it would offer an unexpected triumph
  - b. We read of Jesus healing, teaching, preaching to try reframe the way in which people understood God
  - c. Jesus is there to strip down the story of God's connection to the people to its basic elements, and to challenge those in power who had made themselves the focus instead of God
  - d. And in the process, Lent is calling us to get off the fence and take action towards God
    - i. Following Jesus is not about watching the world go by sitting on the fence
    - ii. Following Jesus is about taking a stand, as Nicodemus was finding out
    - iii. Jesus wanted that stand to be on the side of the God who created everything, and who wants to be connected to us humans
    - iv. Jesus wanted that stand to be on the side of that unpredictable Spirit, who acts with such freedom and whimsy that it is impossible to predict or control
    - v. Jesus wanted that stand to be with him, as he was on the side of the people who were overlooked, judged, disempowered.
4. Jesus is calling us to risk taking a stand, and to follow his example of compassion, of speaking truth to power. It's a call to a new start. Literally. No wonder he was calling it a rebirthing, spiritually.

#### Reflection questions

1. Tell a story of the secret which was the hardest for you to keep, and how you were finally able to share it.
2. Nicodemus (John 3) was curious about Jesus, but he felt he worried about the social consequences for getting too close to him. How do you relate to Nicodemus? Or not relate to him?
3. If Jesus is challenging Nicodemus to "get off the fence," how would you apply that same question to yourself?

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/the-holy-trinity-2/commentary-on-john-31-17-12>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-31-17-9>