

Secret Agents No More
 John 3:1-17
 The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry
 Church of the Incarnation
 Lent II year A
 March 1, 2026

May the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us; be with us this day, and remain with us always. Amen.

Good morning.

In a time when loneliness and isolation are plaguing our young people, middle aged and old, in a time when so much of the polarization of our country could be bridged if we had mechanism, means and inclination to listen to people with different perspectives, I'm wondering how our communities of faith, might have tangible ways to connect and to care.

I'm kind of wondering, in our chaotic world, in a country where the false narrative of white Christian Nationalism is parading around as orthodox Christianity, rather than a narrow, idolatrous political ideology, I'm kind of wondering if we in the Episcopal church might take this moment to be secret agents no more?

Might it be possible for us to come out of the progressive Christianity Closet and embody the life, death and hope of Jesus Christ?

I'm wondering if we might, learn from and embrace the pharisee Nicodemus as the patron saint of the Episcopal Church?

Think about it—he starts out slow. He starts out really quiet, a learned fellow, who is low key about his interest in Jesus of Nazareth. But then, wow, at the end, (which turns out is the beginning) he and everyone else knows where he stands...

Let's do some background

Nicodemus is
 a Pharisee—a learned religious authority—
 a man of ways and means

who comes to Jesus in the night, under the cover of darkness. Because he will not risk people knowing that he maybe he might believe...

He comes to Jesus looking to get a verbal confirmation to the question—
 are you the one?

Are you the Messiah?

Nicodemus says,

"It seems from all you've been doing

—you've got a very close connection to the Lord..."

And then rather than a yes or no—

a simple answer—
 thank you very much
 —Jesus tells him about being born again—
 from above.

An answer, that quite frankly,
 makes about as much sense
 as a guy standing for a whole game
 in the football end zone with a placard that reads JOHN 3:16.

Nicodemus
 isn't sure what to do with the answer or the encounter.

Jesus isn't going easy on him.
 Jesus continues on,
 "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..."

Nicodemus leaves the encounter—
 perplexed, perhaps more confused
 than when he began—
 he wants a simple, quick answer.
 So he can believe. But that's not how it happens.

Much like learning to walk as infants,
 it doesn't come right away.
 Walking takes work,
 begins with crawling and falling,
 scooting and rolling,
 and eventually the muscles learn.
 Faith, belief are like that, they are not quickly had.

But what we know about our friend Nicodemus, and this is why I want him to be our patron
 Saint

is that when he wanders off he doesn't go away forever.
 He's one of those scriptural characters
 who continues periodically
 to walk across the biblical stage.

Clearly he goes away and thinks about it.

Four chapters later—
 the crowd following Jesus is growing.
 Those in power are nervous.
 The rif-raff are gathering
 —rules—customs and traditions are being questioned.

So the Pharisees plot to arrest Jesus
 —apprehend him—
 they go so far as to send
 the temple police after him—
 but they come back without him saying,
 “Never have we heard someone teach like this...”
 The Pharisees furious—
 demand that Jesus be found guilty—
 but then Nicodemus—one of their own—
 quietly, succinctly uses his knowledge of the law—
 to save Jesus, he says,
 “Our law does not judge people
 without first giving them a hearing
 to find out what they are doing does it?”

Nicodemus—questioning—
 wondering—but more importantly—not giving up on Jesus. His pondering continues.
 Then several chapters later, Jesus is now dead on the cross.
 But who goes to Pilate to claim his body?

Joseph of Arimethea— and
 Nicodemus— are the ones who risk their lives
 and their reputations
 to claim the body of the treasonous preacher.
 They claim his body
 from Pilate himself
 and bury him—
 Nicodemus bringing and anointing Jesus’ body
 with a hundred pounds of oil and herbs.

Nicodemus keeps coming back—
 asking—testing—
 seeing—and eventually believing.
 Enough to risk it all.

But none of it happens instantaneously—
 readily or automatically.
 Faith is not flipped on
 like an electrical switch.
 It is nurtured, grown and worked at—
 much like the muscles we build on our body.

He comes to it slowly, gathering data, reasoning and wondering and then, when it counts,
 he risks his reputation for his growing faith.

We do not hear from scripture, but we can only imagine the look on his face, when that very tomb in which he laid, and then anointed Jesus' dead crucified body, is now empty. We can only imagine how he feels as what he thought was an end is now a new beginning.

That is what I long for us. That we ask our questions of Jesus, ruminate on the answer we find and then for us to come out as believers.

Standing and witnessing in fierce opposition to those who would say, that Jesus wants us to arrest and detain people without warrant or trial.

Witnessing against those who say, "Might is right," "This is ours"

And instead, embody what Jesus Christ lived and died and rose again for:

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

"You shall welcome the stranger."

"Blessed are those who revile and persecute you."

"He who is without sin, should throw the first stone."

Let us please be like Nicodemus, let us come with our doubts, ask our questions and embody, boldly and completely, our faith in Christ.

Let us be secret agents no more.

Amen.