

# Sunday's Sermon

## Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

250 Fox Hill Road ■ Hampton, Virginia 23669

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The Reverend David E. Fox

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John 3:1-17

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

I'm a Level II coach in the ELCA, with foci in discipleship and missional leadership. In coaching, we often say that if something is not brought into the light, we cannot work on it. If someone doesn't name their fears, their obstacles, or their personal hang-ups, we can't coach them through those things. It's not until something is brought into the light that growth can begin.

Some of you know this from experience. It wasn't until doctors could identify what was hidden in the dark that treatment could begin. Others know this in more ordinary ways. If we hide our lack of exercise or our attachment to calorie-packed drinks, our health will not change. Progress begins when what is hidden is named.

When we bring things into the light, we can see them for what they are. We can identify them. We can learn. We can respond. Today's Gospel invites us to do exactly that: in the midst of darkness, bring everything to the Light.

This passage contains perhaps the most quoted verse in the Bible. But before we get to Jesus' monologue, we begin with a dialogue — a Pharisee named Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night. Night matters in John's Gospel.

"In the beginning was the Word..." And a few verses later, "In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Later in John, Jesus will say, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

So when Nicodemus comes in the dark, John is not giving us a time stamp. He is giving us theology.

Yet even in the dark, Nicodemus is standing before the Light of the world.

His name is interesting. Nicodemus means "people" or "victory of the people." He may be speaking not only for himself, but for a group — perhaps the Pharisees, perhaps the religious elite, perhaps even humanity itself. He comes with questions. He comes with confusion. He comes with all the baggage his people carry. And notice this: Jesus does not dismiss him.

Nicodemus does something we often resist — he steps out of the darkness and brings himself to the Light. He may not yet understand who Jesus is. He may have the wrong questions. But he has come to the right place.

Nicodemus wants to talk about signs. In John’s Gospel, miracles are called “signs.” A sign is not the end in itself — it points beyond itself to something greater. When Jesus turns water into wine, the wine is not the point. The abundance of God’s kingdom is the point.

Nicodemus has seen what Jesus has done — turning water into wine, the signs in Jerusalem — and he recognizes something divine at work. But it seems that Nicodemus wants something measurable. Something impressive. Perhaps even something that enhances his own standing.

And Jesus shifts the conversation entirely. Instead of talking about signs, Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God. Instead of talking about greatness, Jesus talks about being born from above.

Nicodemus comes asking what he can do. Jesus answers by saying there is nothing you can do. “You must be born from above.”

Jesus uses the Biblical Greek word *anōthen*. *Anōthen* has a double meaning: again and above.

Nicodemus hears one meaning. Jesus means another. Nicodemus hears “again.” Hence his question about entering the mother’s womb a second time.

Jesus is using *anōthen* to mean “From above.” He isn’t talking about repetition. He’s talking about origin. The initiative is from heaven – is from God.

And here is where our Lutheran ears perk up. No one makes themselves be born. Birth is not an achievement. It is not a task completed. It is a gift received.

We often imagine that salvation depends on something we initiate — asking Jesus into our hearts, saying the right prayer, making the right move. But Scripture never presents us as the active agents of salvation.

Jesus saves.

Jesus acts.

Jesus gives.

We receive.

Like infants in our first birth, we are passive in our being born from above. The Spirit blows where it wills. New life is not produced by our effort. It is created by God’s grace.

Perhaps what Nicodemus is really bringing into the light is his need for control — his need to measure, to achieve, to manage the kingdom of God. And if we are honest, he may be speaking for all of us.

There are many sitting in these pews today — and one standing in this pulpit — who prefer to keep our need for control in the dark. Because as long as it stays there, we don't have to deal with it.

But the truth is this: we are not in control.

Life is not neat and karmic. It is full of ups and downs and loop-de-loops. Difficulty is not proof that we are unloved. Suffering is not evidence that we have failed.

What we have is not control — we have a Savior. And this Savior goes with us into the darkest places and shines there.

It is a freeing thing to let go of the illusion of control. To stop pretending we manage our own salvation. To stop hiding what binds us. Because here is the hard truth: the darkness is not fooling Jesus. The only person being fooled is us. What we keep hidden continues to bind us. What we bring to Christ can begin to be healed.

That does not mean that naming something guarantees instant healing of disease or addiction. But it does mean we do not face it alone.

The body of Christ — the Church — is meant to respond without gossip, without shame, without judgment. We are called to come alongside one another. To pray. To listen. To seek help when needed. To bear burdens together.

Bringing things into the Light requires vulnerability.

But in vulnerability, there is freedom.

Because the darkness does not overcome.

So what is it that you need to bring before Jesus?

Is it fear?

Is it guilt?

Is it loneliness?

Is it something you have done that weighs heavily on your heart?

Just like a doctor cannot treat what is never named, healing rarely begins with what remains hidden.

Bring it to the Light.

Let Christ shine truth on it.

Let Christ shine life on it.

Let Christ lead you toward freedom.

For “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” — not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

That includes Nicodemus.

That includes you.

That includes the parts of your life you would rather keep in the dark.

And once we have received the gift of the Light, we do not hide it — we reflect it.

We live as people born from above.

We live eternal life now.

We live as those who trust that the Light has already won.

The Good News for us to day is this: There is no darkness in you that Christ has not already entered.