



Sunday Sermon
March 1, 2026
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Lent II

John 3: 1-17

Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. AMEN.

In college, once I completed all the distribution requirements most of my courses were in mathematics and religion. I could have majored in either, but I settled on mathematics. Religion is the realm of mystery. Mathematics is the discipline of numbers and solutions.

As my studies advanced, I began to study more complex topics like topology, and number theory. Oh my, and Dr. Puckett's seminar for departmental majors, well, it felt like mathematical hazing! But, by golly, I would solve the problems.

I remember one extraordinarily frustrating and long night, when I contended with a vexing problem. I was going to pound it into submission but after several hours I instead was defeated. I slammed the book shut and gave up. I ended the night with questions ... and the illusive solution beyond my reach.

We all come upon so many problems that seem to have no ready answer. What will I do about my relationship with this friend or family member? How am I going to live the life I want to live as I age? What do I really believe about my purpose in life? What is it all about? What of God? And how do I understand living, dying and this thing that is me? Questions, questions, questions...and answers that are...beyond our reach.

I thought of that night as I met again Nicodemus in his night with Jesus. His questions were not about a mathematical puzzle but about the deep mysteries of God. He comes with so many questions.

What transpires is a confusing interchange between Nicodemus and Jesus. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one sees the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus struggles with his algebraic thinking and his fixed preconceptions about God, the world, and himself. He is going to pound that problem: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born again?"

He is stuck on the questions and puzzles. The teacher, Jesus tries to reframe with the notion of rebirth with baptismal imagery of water and the spirit...still no light bulbs go off. Jesus then offers words that later generations will hear as comfortable words of deep wisdom:

*God so loves the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him
may not perish but have eternal life.*

Nicodemus still cannot unlock the equation. Like a mathematician unable connect numbers and symbols to see elegant beauty, Nicodemus cannot connect Jesus' words so they will sing salvation in his soul. He drifts back into the night, still confused, still in the dark.

Friends, I get Nicodemus. I feel him. I suspect we all are so often in that night with him...with John of the Cross' dark night of the soul, or a night of loss, or depression, or just struggling with life. We pound and pound the problem, until we slam shut the proverbial book.

The story of Nicodemus and Jesus is good news because it doesn't end on that night. Jesus later goes to Jerusalem for The Festival of the Tabernacles, and he teaches in the Temple courts. The Sanhedrin have gathered because they see Jesus as a threat to be eliminated. And Nicodemus, as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, is there.

Others plot, he questions: "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" He questions power and moves a bit more out of the shadows of darkness. Nicodemus is sitting with the deep questions - questions that matter.

The Sanhedrin are not in a justice mood; they are in retribution mode. They have the answer and slam the book shut on the inquirer of truth: "Are you too a Galilean?" In other words, shut up or you will share his fate. Even as Nicodemus withdraws, we can imagine that his inquiry cannot be so easily cut off. Something is happening.

It is his Lent, just as this is ours. It is his time to go deeper, while not knowing even where he is headed. It is his time to question. It is our time to question.

As a mathematician, I eventually learned the value of stepping away from a vexing problem. Indeed, there is now medical evidence that "sleeping on it" can help us solve problems, dilemmas, settle mysteries in our mind. So, that dark night can be the birthplace of light.

And so, Nicodemus appears one last time in John's gospel. And it is night:

Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and removed the body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom...

Peter has fled; the disciples are in disarray. Jesus is dead, desecrated and a scandal to his followers. It is darkest darkness. Nicodemus is there, making a most extraordinary and extravagant gift of myrrh and aloes.

Good Friday is a place bereft of solutions - only sorrow. Our greatest fear might just be that the end all our puzzling and questioning is an empty tomb - that after a life of Lent there is nothing.

Nicodemus buries Jesus, but his very actions suggest that the deep questions of faith, of Jesus, of being born anew remain unresolved. He pours out irrational love and care upon the

crucified. He chooses to let all the questions of meaning remain open. It is tidier to walk away but he sits with unknowing, uncertainty, hope.

There is no story of what Nicodemus did on the third day. We do not know whether he ran to the empty tomb, went to Emmaus or what. I have trouble seeing him alone. I imagine him in the huddle of other seekers and followers, sharing what they saw and heard - questioning and trying to find meaning. He may even have shared the words he heard that first night with Jesus. He would have heard the extraordinary story of Mary's encounter with the Rabbi risen. Something deeply holy can happen when we question and seek together, which takes me back to a last moment as a student of mathematics.

I had to present my honors thesis on an original proof in number theory to the assembled department faculty. About halfway through the proof, Dr. Ebby found a mistake in my work. The wheels started to come off the bus. You know the feeling in your chest. Then Dr. Alvarez found a second mistake. Now, I'm entering the 7th circle of shame. I had no answers, just an unsolved problem. "But wait!" says Dr. Croom, the mistakes offset each other and the proof holds." A crash was averted, and I reached the blessed solution.

In life and in the realm of faith, problems and solutions are never tidy. Solutions to problems might be filled with errors. Sometimes such errors are paths to new insights. And questions are things of beauty. What if asking brave and curious questions is passkey to a life of learning and growing in grace, in love, in Christ? What if the life of faith is not about answers at all but about asking questions within a beloved community that tells stories of mystery, where the impossible is possible, and where we wonder about truth, beauty, and a God who so loves the world?