

The Second Sunday in Lent  
March 1, 2026  
The Rev. Scott Walters

When our daughter Kate was in about the second grade, she came home from school one day and said, "Riley is the bravest kid in our whole class. At recess we were all wondering if anybody could climb to the top of the slide and jump, and Riley just went right up and jumped off." Ardelle asked if Kate jumped too, and she said, "No. I was too scared." "Do you think Riley was scared." "No, she wasn't scared at all! She's brave!" And Ardelle said, "Well, if Riley wasn't scared, maybe that wasn't something she had to be brave for."

I don't know if Kate has given that exchange much thought over the many years since it took place, but I think about it on a regular basis. Wisdom fit for second grade playgrounds is about my speed, I guess. But it's true for all of us, no matter our age, that if we are not afraid, bravery is not required. If nothing in my situation scares me, courage is not the virtue I need to get through it.

There's a character in one of our readings today who I think, in terms of bravery, ranks right up there with that shepherd boy with a sling who faced down a giant, or Rahab when she hid Hebrew spies from the king of Jericho on her roof, or Jael who ... Actually, I can't tell you what Jael did. It's in the Bible but it's not a story fit to be told in church. See what I did there? I know how to get Episcopalians to go read their Bibles. A brave, brave rabbi named Nicodemus is the one I'd like us to spend a little time with this morning.

There's a hint in our gospel text that Nicodemus may have been afraid. Why else would he have come to Jesus at night? It's a detail that stands out only more starkly when, in the very next chapter of John, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well, and we're told that their conversation takes place at noon, in broad daylight, for everyone to see. We're meant to note the contrast, don't you think?

Nicodemus might come off as a coward to you, since he was slinking around at night to ask his questions of this Jesus. Today, at least, I take Nicodemus's fear as a measure of his courage. I mean, when's the last time you pursued a truth that seemed so dangerous or scandalous, but one that you wanted so desperately to know, that you slipped out of your house under the cover of darkness to search it out? Were you being scared or were you being brave when you did that? I'd say both. Because if you'd only been afraid you would have pulled the covers up over your head and stayed put.

Even more bravery will be required of Nicodemus as the conversation unfolds. He says that it's clear that God is doing something special through Jesus. No one can do such signs apart from the presence of God. Jesus responds, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." It's not clear to me at all what this has to do with what Nicodemus has just said. Apparently it isn't to Nicodemus either. So he says, "I have no idea what you're talking about, Jesus. How can anyone be born after having grown old?"

Now, friends, to my mind, this is the moment where Nicodemus climbs up onto the slide that scares him. Because the one thing I would try to hide from any teacher I admire is that I'm clueless and confused. I'd be the guy who nods along. "You're so right Jesus. Being born from above. That's where it's at. 100%." Then I'd slink back into the night to type "born from above" into my phone, hoping to get the reference apparently all enlightened folks, especially rabbis, are supposed to know. If there's just one thing I want to be in this life, it's in the know.

But that's not Nicodemus. He stays present, even in his confusion. He tells Jesus he doesn't understand but he wants to understand. And the strange conversation just keeps getting stranger. To enter the kingdom, one needs not only to be born from above, but to be born from water and Spirit, and the Spirit is a wind that blows where it will. Wind that we hear the sound of but don't know where it's come from or where it goes. "How can these things be?" Says brave Nicodemus. "I still don't get it." "Are you a teacher of Israel," Jesus replies, "and yet you do not understand these things?"

I know Episcopalians like to talk about how comfortable we are with ambiguity. How the truth about things is usually gray, not black and white, and that we're okay with that. I've never heard an Episcopalian, or anyone else for that matter, say, "You know, what I really like is to feel stupid." But isn't that at least part of what Nicodemus must have felt? The rabbi he admired so much that he'll set up a covert meeting with him at night if that's what it takes to see him, that rabbi has effectively just said, "How can you be so dense, Nicodemus? You're a rabbi. You're a

teacher, for crying out loud.” And yet, somehow, even feeling like this teacher may think him a fool, Nicodemus still refuses to run away. I can only aspire to be so brave.

There’s some irony in the fact that this is all taking place in the lead up to the best known Bible verse in the world. I grew up believing that John 3.16 was kind of the quick start guide for salvation. You know those one page documents they include with a new appliance? The full owner’s manual may be as thick as a Bible, but the essence of how to get your blender running is boiled down to a few sentences. So, if what I need to know is how to be saved, as the King James Version of Heaven’s quick start guide says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Got it. If I only know one thing about the Christian gospel it’s that I need to believeth in Jesus, so I do not perish, and so I do have everlasting life.

But there’s a big problem with reading John 3.16 out of its context, maybe painted onto a bridge abutment or the bare chest of a football fan. The problem is that we forget all about brave Nicodemus. We miss the strangeness of Jesus’s language about a kingdom that doesn’t behave like our kingdoms do. And we miss the courageous act of staying present even when we feel stupid, even when we feel confused, even when we feel like Jesus may not even like us very much right now, maybe because our belief feels so flimsy and so fragile. But the good news is that grace really is available when we muster the courage to stay present anyway, like Nicodemus.

I used to think this meant God will not grant us salvation until we manage to tamp down our fears, our shame, our rationality and believe certain facts about Jesus. Once I believe certain things, God will give me certain things, the most important one being that God’s condemnation, which I so justly deserve, will be withdrawn, and I’ll be given everlasting life instead. All I have to do is believe. Somehow this is supposed to be what love looks like in the heart of God. It’s God as the stern grader of a quiz on Christian belief, checking which circles I’ve filled in with my number two pencil before granting me salvation. Is that what you were taught God’s love was like? Love that’s withheld ... love that’s actually poised to condemn you, until you manage to believe a few essential things?

I’m afraid that this is the gospel that often gets told, if our fears and our confusions send us away before we hear John 3.17. Which is a clear announcement to Nicodemus, and so to us, that God simply isn’t in the condemnation business: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Not just the ones

who believe. The world. That's what the text says. The world will be saved. Full stop. The question is only whether I could ever believe such ridiculously good news and begin to live by the light of a love that large, right now.

"Why wouldn't you believe something so wonderful?" you might ask. Well, unfortunately, one of my favorite ways of dealing with my own fear of failure and inadequacy is by condemning you. I always feel a little better, at least for a minute, when I do. It's better yet when you and I can agree to condemn her. Now we're bound together in a friendship forged from condemnation. But these familiar old ways of dealing with our fears don't work for long, do they? Deeper down, we know that in a world that runs on condemnation, eventually condemnation will come for us. Perhaps the terrifying mission Nicodemus set off on one night, in spite of his fears, may have simply been a mission to leave behind the false comforts of this world of condemnation, and be brave enough to trust in a love whose only desire is to save.

Friends, please hear the good news of the gospel. God does not require you to be brave in order to be saved, and God will not condemn you, even for being afraid. I only aspire to the bravery of Nicodemus because I recognize how my fear of being wrong, my fear of being thought a fool, my fear that no one would love me, not even God, if they really knew me ... I need this rabbi's bravery because I know all too well how these familiar human fears send us back down the slide, into this world of condemnation and away from God's unconditional love. The one love that will never back away from you.

The world will be saved. That is the gospel truth. The question is only whether or not you and I will muster the courage, in the midst of our fears, to believe in a love that refuses to condemn. A love that only comes into the world to save it. Maybe Calvary is just one little corner of the playground where we cheer one another on as we each climb onto the slides that scare us, praying for the bravery to step off, and into a Love that came into this world for just one reason: to catch us.