

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
March 1, 2026 – The Second Sunday of Lent
John 3:1-17
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Today's lesson from the Gospel of John – the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus – is famous for their discussion of being “born again.” Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, a man of faith in God. He had recognized that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God by the “signs” that Jesus did. In John's Gospel the word “signs” refers to the miracles of Jesus, such as healing the sick, feeding the five thousand, and raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. Because Nicodemus believed that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God, he wanted to know more about him. Nicodemus was checking Jesus out, not making an open commitment to follow him, so he “came to Jesus by night,” that is, secretly.

Nicodemus opens the conversation by saying that he recognizes Jesus as a teacher who has come from God because he has seen the miracles Jesus has done. Yes, he has seen the “signs,” but as for what is more important than the signs, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” The exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus now hinges on the interpretation of a word with double meaning – either “from above” or “again.” A good analogy in English is our phrase “from the top.” This can mean “from a height,” as in “a view from the top,” or “from the beginning,” as in “take it from the top.” Nicodemus interprets Jesus as saying “again,” as in “take it from the top,” and he asks the famous questions, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”

Jesus did not mean “again” in this sense. He meant “from above,” or from heaven above, from the Spirit of God. This is the rebirth that is both possible and truly important. It is also difficult to understand. Jesus teaches that the Spirit of God is like the wind – it “blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” We cannot grasp the Spirit. We cannot comprehend its movements. But we can see its effects, and it can change our lives.

For Christians being “born again” means to undergo a spiritual rebirth. Evangelical Protestants speak of having an experience of “conversion,” often at a particular moment in time. This “conversion” is a spiritual event that changes a person's life. Other people may see the “signs” of conversion in a person's life when the person's life is changed to be more in line with God's vision of life.

What about Nicodemus? Were there signs that he had been “born again” of the Spirit? We don't know much about Nicodemus from the Gospel accounts, but we do know that after Jesus was crucified Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepared Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus brought 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes for the wrapping of Jesus' body in linen cloths, an extravagant gift that may have shown Nicodemus' great respect for Jesus. We may regard this gift as a “sign” of the Spirit's work because we know from scripture that generosity toward God and God's people is rightfully regarded as being in line with God's will.

In the last two weeks I have spoken about the dominical sacraments – the sacraments given by Christ to the church – Baptism and Holy Eucharist. Now I want to begin discussing what the Episcopal Church refers to as “sacramental rites.” We believe that they evolved in the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. There are five: Confirmation, Ordination, Holy Matrimony, Reconciliation of a Penitent (Confession), and Unction. I will begin with

Confirmation and Ordination – both clearly and directly connected to the work of the Holy Spirit. A Bishop or Bishops preside over both these rites, with prayer and the laying on of hands.

As you know, in the Episcopal Church and other denominations it is common for babies and young children to be baptized. Their parents and sponsors speak on their behalf to make the vows of Baptism. Confirmation is the sacramental rite by which older young people and adults, after instruction and preparation, “confirm” their commitment to the vows previously made for them in Baptism. Confirmation is a mature, public affirmation of faith.

People from other denominations sometimes want to join the Episcopal Church. If someone had belonged to the Roman Catholic or Orthodox branches of Christianity and wants to join the Episcopal Church, he or she is not Confirmed by an Episcopal Bishop, but “Received.” The words the Bishop says are: “We recognize you as a member of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, and we receive you into the fellowship of this Communion.” This is because in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican Communion we believe there has been an unbroken succession of ordinations and consecrations of Bishops from the time of the first apostles to the present. Therefore, a person Confirmed in the Orthodox Church or Roman Catholic Church has already been Confirmed by a Bishop in the “apostolic succession.” There is no reason for the person to be confirmed again by an Episcopal Bishop. If a person comes from a denomination not in the “apostolic succession” – a church in a Reformed tradition, such as the Presbyterian church, for example – then that person is Confirmed by an Episcopal Bishop and in this way becomes a member of the Episcopal Church.

At the same service where people are Confirmed and/or Received some people who are already members of the Episcopal Church may desire “Reaffirmation.” Individuals come forward and the Bishop prays with each person in these words: “May the Holy Spirit, who has begun a good work in you, direct and uphold you in the service of Christ and his kingdom.” This is a public reaffirmation of one’s baptismal covenant and one’s commitment to Christ.

Ordination is the sacramental rite by which a person becomes a Deacon, Priest, or Bishop. The Book of Common Prayer describes the function of each. Bishops carry on the apostolic work of leading, supervising, and uniting the Church. Presbyters or elders, now known as priests, take part in the governance of the Church, in its missionary and pastoral work, in preaching the Word of God and administering the Sacraments. Deacons assist Bishops and Priests in all this work, and it is a special responsibility of Deacons to minister in Christ’s name to the poor, the sick, the suffering, and the helpless.

When an Episcopalian senses a call from God to ordained ministry as a Deacon or Priest, a long process of discernment begins. The Diocese sets requirements that a person must meet in order to be ordained. If all goes well, the person is ordained by the Bishop. A Bishop is a priest who is elected by the people of a Diocese and is then ordained by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and at least two other Bishops. In the services of Ordination the persons being ordained promise to do the tasks to which they are called. We believe that the Holy Spirit is present in the prayers and in the laying on of hands by the Bishop.

In the service of Morning Prayer these words addressed to God are part of The General Thanksgiving (Book of Common Prayer, page 101): “And we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies, that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives.” In Baptism and all the rites I discussed today people make promises, commitments in words. What matters for all of us is how our lives bear witness to the promises we have made, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and for the love of Christ. Amen.