

Grace and Peace to you all from God, our promise and our hope –
Amen.

In our gospel lesson today, Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a set of convictions he wants to test – especially when it comes to what is actually possible in living out this life of faith as a disciple of Christ.

As we heard in John, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish court system of his day. It was the Sanhedrin who provided legal counsel and even placed charges against those who had broken God’s law. And as such, Nicodemus was a leader well-versed in the laws of the Torah and the teachings that had come to govern his community’s life.

It was from this lofty position that he thought he had the whole “faith” thing figured out.

Which is likely why Nicodemus had such an adverse reaction to Jesus’ teaching today when he shared that experiencing the kingdom of God isn’t necessarily about following the rules, our own knowledge, or even our place within our community of faith; it’s about being open to the untameable wonder of God’s presence right now within our life and world.

For Nicodemus, his faith and his life as a child of God had always been a calculated equation for which he had the “right” answer.

By today’s standards, he would have likely been known as someone with a Type “A” personality. He was disciplined and orderly. He knew the rules and he liked to follow them. If given a coloring sheet, Nicodemus would have asked for the required color listing before happily and carefully coloring inside the lines.

And so, it is no surprise that Nicodemus continues to cling to what he knows – quite literally – even when his rabbi and teacher tells him it is spoiling his ability to hear and receive the truth of the one speaking to him from God.

But I don't think Nicodemus was or is alone.

A few years ago, when I shared this text during a children's sermon, the idea of being *born again* seemed equally as ridiculous to the young people gathered as it did to Nicodemus. It was at this part in the story – the call to be born again – that a three-year-old yelled out, "I'm not going back in there!"

Their older sibling assured them they couldn't fit, and we all laughed. But maybe we also understood Nicodemus' childlike refusal a little bit better.

We all like to think we have this faith thing figured out to some degree.

We take comfort in the fact that we have faith in God.

We trust in the rules we have come to know and the promises we have come to hold.

But none of it frees us from the temptation to think that somehow, if we only tried hard enough, we could simply free ourselves from this need for God to save us at all. That we could refuse the need to surrender, to be reborn, to endure the agony of grief and waiting that comes with this life as we seek God's presence.

We might even be inclined to think we don't actually need this season of Lent at all; we don't need to be reshaped and reformed as God's people because, really, we're doing okay.

So, like Nicodemus, we are tempted to call out to Christ and say, “No thanks. We don’t any more spiritual pointers on the promises of God; we’ve got this whole Christianity thing figured out.”

And maybe this is because, *like Nicodemus*, we sometimes find God’s promises truly too difficult to fully believe for ourselves.

Throughout the scriptures we encounter story after story where our human knowledge meets God’s truth in miraculous and absurd ways. We can all likely recall a few stories from the scriptures where God’s promises seemed laughable, if not completely impossible in the midst of life’s circumstances – but they turned out to be true. And so, I’d like to uplift a few for you this morning in the midst of Nicodemus’ story:

Firstly, I can’t help but think of the story of Sarah and Abraham. Sarah is one of the great matriarchs of our faith. She had always dreamed of bearing a child with Abraham but her body had aged well beyond the years of childbirth. When she and Abraham were visited the by three strangers one day, she overhears the promise of the Spirit, “You will have a son in your old age.” And she laughs at God in outright disbelief – yet God’s promise holds true and she becomes the mother of God’s people, her descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

The next story I want to uplift is that of a father named Jairus, who fell at Jesus’ feet and pled for the life of his daughter who was deathly ill. He trusted that Jesus could save her, but as Jesus made his way to their home he was repeatedly stopped by others in need of healing. With the crowds pressing in on him it was impossible for Jesus to reach the young girl in time. Yet in hearing this Jesus said, “Do not be afraid; only believe.”

When Jesus came to the house, he saw a commotion: people weeping and wailing loudly in grief over the young girl’s death. When he

entered, Jesus said, “Why do you make such a commotion and weep? The child is not dead, but only sleeping.” And the crowd who were gathered there laughed. So, Jesus sent them all outside and, taking the child’s parents he went in to see the her. Taking the child by the hand, he said to her, “Little girl, get up!” And immediately the girl stood up and began to walk about. And they were all overcome with amazement.

The last story that comes to mind is that of the unnamed women who were shocked to find an empty tomb when they returned to prepare Jesus body with holy spices. When heavenly beings confirmed that Christ was risen from the dead, they were tasked with telling this news to all who would listen. But when they shared the truth of Christ’s resurrection with Jesus disciples, the women were laughed out of the room and scolding for telling “idle tales.”

So perhaps we are in good company when it comes to the real resistance we experience when we hear and share God’s promises proclaimed before us now.

Maybe it’s okay to rest in the midst of our questions and our doubts this Lenten season as we learn to lean into the promises of God – even if we don’t fully understand them yet. They are, after all, outrageous:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

God’s promises tell us that in the midst of our doubts and frustrations with this life of faith, we can be certain that Christ will come to meet us where we are, proclaiming God’s love again and again until we can hear it and hold it in our own way.

And maybe that is a part of our Lenten journey this season – to allow for the soil of our faith to be overturned, breaking the old and harmful narratives of this world that have told us that we have to have it all figured out, and making room for the fullness of God’s promises here and now. Promises that are at work within us all creating, re-orienting, and reshaping us constantly to know we are beloved, named, and claimed as children of God.

So, may we be open to the untameable wonder of God’s coming kingdom here and now.

May we know the promises we have received from God into the depths of our soul.

And may we share those promises of great love out in the world.

May this be so among us – Amen.