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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Lent 2A, March 1, 2026
John 3:1-17
In Praise of Nicodemus and the Holy Spirit

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon in praise of Nicodemus. Even more, it is a sermon in praise of the Holy Spirit.

This sermon is my second swing at the story of Nicodemus, with some overlap with what I said in an earlier recent sermon¹. That recent sermon was one of my Wednesday evening sermons on St. John's Gospel. It was the sermon on this morning's text, John 3:1-17. Now I am going to repeat some of the things I said in that earlier sermon, though I expect to head off in some different directions from that earlier sermon.

So, a sermon in praise of Nicodemus and the Holy Spirit. Let's begin with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was an old man, and Jesus was a young one, in a world that respected age and seasoning. Nicodemus was well established in the world. He was a Pharisee, which meant that he was a student of God's holy law and tried to live a pious life. He was a ruler of Israel. Jesus was a poor man with nowhere to lay his head. Nicodemus had the standing that would permit him to speak to other Pharisees and the high priests and reason with them (John 7). Jesus was known simply as a carpenter's son from Galilee, and he was opposed by the authorities and many of the pastors of Israel. Nicodemus had all the advantages compared to Jesus.

Yet, in this morning's reading we find that the old man Nicodemus comes humbly and respectfully to the younger man. The advantages of wealth and social standing were all on the side of Nicodemus in his nighttime meeting with Jesus. But he lacked one thing: He did not yet have the Holy Spirit.

Jesus tried to explain this to Nicodemus. Jesus said that the old man must be born again. Nicodemus could make no sense of this. So, Jesus continued with his explanation:

¹ So, I am repeating some of what I said in my Wednesday evening sermon for November 5, 2025 on John 3:1-15.

⁵Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water *and the Spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:5, RSV)

The thing about this saying is that, in the end, *no one* was born of water and the Spirit *until* Jesus was glorified. Not even the Twelve. They were fickle followers of Jesus until his resurrection. That was the changing point in their lives. That is when they received the Holy Spirit.

St. John speaks of the necessity of the Holy Spirit in John Chapter 7. There, Jesus preaches about "rivers of living water," but the folks could not figure it out. In a way, I do not blame them. The Bible says that they were unable to understand the preaching of Jesus until they learned of his resurrection and received the Holy Spirit. The passage in John 7 goes this way:

³⁷On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" ³⁹Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-39, RSV)

So, Nicodemus is in the same boat as everyone else. Here he is, an old, esteemed leader of Israel. But he stands puzzled before Jesus because he does not yet have the Spirit that would sweep him along in faith. He was not yet filled with the phenomenal *possibilities* introduced into our world by the resurrection of Jesus. He has not yet been overwhelmed and inspired by the idea that there is afoot in our world a good man who cannot be defeated, not even by death!

Nicodemus, then, does not yet have the Holy Spirit. But what he can do, he does. He honors Jesus and tries to protect him. For example, when the Pharisees and high priests send officers to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus speaks up on behalf of the younger man. He speaks to his fellow leaders of Israel, saying

⁵¹Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does? (John 7:50-51, RSV)

Nicodemus probably knew that his defense of Jesus, even so mildly stated as this, would not be received well by his fellow leaders. He was going against the flow. He was trying to save Jesus from death.

And then, at the end of the story, again we meet up with Nicodemus. He risks the wrath of Pilate and of his fellow rulers of Israel by respectfully burying the body of Jesus after the crucifixion. He and another good man do that. We read of it in John 19:

³⁸After this Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So he came and took away his body.

³⁹Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. (John 19:38-40, RSV)

So, in this morning's reading, Nicodemus did not yet have the Holy Spirit, and yet he was a good man. When other rulers of Israel rejected and condemned young Jesus, Nicodemus was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. It was almost as if Nicodemus *hoped* that Jesus was as good and holy as the words and miracles of Jesus suggested.

So, that is Nicodemus. He is a good man, doing what he can, though he does not yet have the Holy Spirit.

Now let's turn to consider the Holy Spirit.

Maybe you have heard of the Pentecostalist Church. Maybe you have heard of the worship services in Pentecostalist churches, with the people singing and clapping their hands, shouting Amen to the sermon, and maybe jumping around. I have seen such things, and I like it!

Pentecostalism is a complex matter, and I am no expert on it. Wikipedia reports that there are over 700 Pentecostalist *denominations* and that it is a growing Christian movement, especially in the Global South and in Third

World countries.² Some parts of Pentecostalism might include snake handling, especially in Appalachian churches.³ Speaking in tongues is a classic trait of Pentecostalism.

So, Pentecostalism is a complex matter, and I am no expert on it. But I think I can lift up a big picture conviction of the Pentecostalists, and that is this: The resurrection of Jesus should give us some more *spirit* in life. It should make us happier and more hopeful. If we really take it in that Jesus is risen, we cannot remain as unmoved as a stick or stone before this news. The resurrection of Jesus should change us, perhaps making us more bold, perhaps making us more saintly.

And I think that it is important to point out that there are forms of Pentecostalism that are appropriate for Lutherans. There are forms of being swept along by the Holy Spirit that fit even calm, quiet, intellectual Lutherans.

To begin making this point, let's note a simple point from the Bible. It is a point about the prophets. The key thing about the prophets is the Holy Spirit. The prophets are moved by the Holy Spirit, going all the way back to Moses. Perhaps you recall the interesting story of Eldad and Medad. The LORD has poured out some of his spirit on those two, and so they start prophesying. Some folks are alarmed by this. They seem to fear that it diminishes Moses to have other folks prophesying too. But Moses does not mind. He is glad for Eldad and Medad to be prophesying. The passage goes this way:

²⁷And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." ²⁸And Joshua the son of Nun, the minister of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, forbid them." ²⁹But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!" (Numbers 11:27-29, RSV)

Cherish that idea of Moses. Cherish his longing that *all* the Lord's people would be prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon all of them.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentecostalism>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snake_handling_in_Christianity

Well, the Lord put his spirit into Isaiah and into Jeremiah and into Amos and so on. They did not conduct themselves in quite the same manner as joyful people in Pentecostalist churches. They did not clap their hands and stomp their feet and jump around and speak in tongues. Instead, they wrote some of the most beautiful and powerful poetry this world has ever known. They were right up there with Homer, and Aeschylus, and Sophocles. They were inspired by the Holy Spirit because they had the Bible. They had the sacred record of what God had done, and they were moved by it all.

So, I say, cherish the old words of Moses that *all* the Lord's people would be prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them all. Cherish these words, I say, because they reach all the way to you and me. We, in our generation, have heard the sacred record of what God has done. Especially we have heard what God has done in Jesus Christ. Let us permit ourselves to be moved by it. Perhaps we will not be moved to speak in tongues or to handle snakes, but we should permit ourselves to be somehow moved in a Christ-like direction. Life need not be one darn thing after another — always pretty much the same. *We* do not need to remain the same. Jesus said to Nicodemus that he needed to be reborn. It is a word from Jesus that remains valid to this day. You and I have received the news that Jesus is risen from the dead, conqueror of death, and we should permit this news to launch out into some holy adventures.

We pray for this bold spirit often. In fact, we are set to pray again for that spirit later in this liturgy. It is part of our Eucharistic Prayer. The Pastor prays these words

- ☐ Send now, we pray, your Holy Spirit, the spirit of our Lord *and of his resurrection*, that we who receive the Lord's body and blood may live to the praise of your glory and receive our inheritance with all your saints in light.

And we answer, Yes!

☑ **Amen. Come, Holy Spirit.**

If there is someone in your life you worry about, pray for that one that the Holy Spirit will come sweeping into his or her live. Pray that the Spirit

will uplift that one into the ways and the virtues of Jesus. And for yourself too, do not forget to pray for the Holy Spirit, that the very life and ways of Jesus will come into your life more than ever before. Let Jesus live within us! And to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.