

Second Sunday in Lent - March 1, 2026

- Genesis 12:1-4a - Psalm 121 - Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 - John 3:1-17

“On the fence”

1. I wonder if you’ve ever felt like you were on the fence on something, on making a decision
 - a. Of course the phrase refers to an unwillingness to come down on one side or the other of a question or the unwillingness to take a stance
 - b. It could be that when we’re on the fence, reluctant to make a decision it could be because we need more information to make the decision
 - c. But it could also be a way of avoiding making the decision, delaying it to stay safe from the consequences from landing on either side of the fence
2. It may not be readily apparent, but Nicodemus was sitting on the fence with regards to Jesus.
 - a. We read about Nicodemus and Jesus in chapter 3, but I need to tell you what happens in chapter 2. The story of the cleansing of the temple.
 - i. In three of the four gospels that scene happens in Holy Week, near the end of the gospel, in the days before Jesus was crucified
 - ii. But here in John’s gospel that story happens at the very beginning
 - iii. John 2 has two remarkable stories: the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine, AND Jesus going to the temple in Jerusalem and flipping the tables of the money changers.
 - iv. Do you remember that? Jesus drives out of the temple area merchants selling animals for sacrifices and those exchanging currency for the purchases.
 - v. Jesus was angry and proclaims they’re disrespecting the God’s temple. People were shocked !
 - vi. So we assume everyone heard of it (Nicodemus included)
 - b. Because of his role in society, Nicodemus finds himself on the fence about Jesus
 - i. Nicodemus was a member of a group that was mostly against Jesus, the Pharisees.
 - ii. Pharisees were the teachers of the law, the ones who fought for the integrity of the traditions and helped people keep them
 - iii. One thing to praise the Pharisees for is that they were not collaborators with the Roman occupiers (as opposed to the

Sadducees who were the priestly and noble class – they were collaborators with Rome!)

- iv. Nicodemus, a very knowledgeable teacher of Scriptures, would have guarded their ability to worship God without needing to bow to Rome.
 - v. But, that's why I mentioned the scene Jesus made at the Temple.
 - vi. That kind of behavior, that kind of disruption would have surely reached the ears of Roman authorities, and would have drawn unwanted attention.
 - vii. Pharisees would NOT have wanted the Romans to get involved in their worship activities, and so Pharisees would have been very suspicious and even opposed to Jesus if he threatened the way things were
 - viii. But what we know from the reading is that Nicodemus was curious about Jesus. In fact, it seems that he's more than curious, and based on what he's heard of miracles and teachings, and even with knowledge of the overturning of tables, Nicodemus felt Jesus was someone who had come from God.
 - ix. Yet Nicodemus seems hesitant, on the fence. After all, he came to Jesus at night which may signal he is trying not to be seen by others.
3. So there we have a Pharisee and Jesus having an evening conversation, and Jesus senses that Nicodemus wants to draw nearer to Jesus (which would mean getting off the fence)
- a. As we look at biblical characters encountering Jesus, we get a sense about Jesus, and here we experience Jesus as being inviting, encouraging a deepening of a relationship
 - b. A remarkable thing happens in this conversation, because we get a glimpse of Jesus unveiling knowledge to Nicodemus
 - c. Here is Jesus as teacher teaching a teacher of the law
 - d. The back and forth may read to us modern people as a bit confusing and convoluted, and we read that Nicodemus isn't "getting" things
 - e. In essence what Jesus is teaching Nicodemus was that to truly understand and experience the way God really runs things, this notion of the realm of God, someone would basically has to start from scratch
 - f. That's what the phrase "being born from above" or "born again" refers to, even if it trips Nicodemus up.
 - g. Jesus is inviting Nicodemus not to "unlearn" things but to allow himself to be birthed into a new, higher understanding
 - h. And for that, Jesus emphasizes, the Spirit has to be our guide: our unpredictable, moving, powerful guide from God.

- i. Picture a newborn child: they cry as they enter their new reality, which isn't as warm and cozy and familiar as the womb.
 - j. It takes the child a bit to get used to their new reality. Slowly they adapt, and they breathe and eat and hear in completely NEW ways.
 - k. And so Jesus is inviting Nicodemus through that threshold into a new awareness and perception of reality
 - l. A key piece of knowledge then is Jesus saying:
 - i. I came to bring eternal life, that's how much God loves people!
 - ii. Not to condemn the world but to save it, just like God wants
 - m. That verse, John 3:16, appears in odd places like a football game on TV
 - i. [slide]
 - ii. That's this "For God so loved the world that [God] gave [God's] only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."
 - iii. That sign is meant to help someone on the fence decide to come to the Jesus side of the fence
 - iv. I wished it referenced also the very next verse 3:17 "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him."
 - v. Getting off the fence about Jesus is embracing his invitation to a reality where God loves us, saves us, doesn't condemn us.
 - 1. It's an invitation for our reset our perception of God.
 - 2. It's an invitation to a new kind of journey
 - 3. It echoes the invitation of God calling Abram and Sarai to travel to another country to settle there, so that they could be blessed there and so that there they would be a blessing to others.
 - 4. Abram and Sarai couldn't just travel half way. They couldn't sit on the fence. God was calling them to buy in fully
 - n. We hear about Nicodemus two more times in John's gospel, and he represents those who really did get off the fence, risking their status in society, and landed on the side of Jesus
4. This Lent, I wonder what you feel Jesus is inviting you to, where Jesus is inviting you to land on his side of the fence.
- a. I want to invite you to ponder that these 40 days, ponder what it means to land on Jesus' side of the fence
 - b. Consider what "staring over" Jesus is inviting you to consider.

- c. In basic terms, if Jesus came to show that God loves us and doesn't condemn us, how do I live out my faith centered on that?
 - i. That probably transforms
 1. how I understand God
 2. how I see myself in God's family
 3. how I embrace my neighbor
5. Jesus is inviting us to believe God loves us. Getting off the fence and really embracing that is life-changing.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-31-17-13>

Reflection Questions

1. Share a story where you found yourself "on the fence" about an important decision you had to make.
2. Some scholars think that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, first came to speak to Jesus **at night** because he didn't want others to find out he was interested in Jesus. Read the only three passages in which Nicodemus is named and see what you conclude: John 3:1-21 (today's passage), John 7:45-52, John 19:38-42.
3. When have you been hesitant to take a personal stance based on your faith because of the backlash you feared that could have?