



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECON SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 1, 2026
GENESIS 12:1-4a; PSALM 121; ROMANS 4:1-15, 13-17; JOHN 3:1-17

RIDING THE MONSTERS IN, DOWN AND THROUGH

John 3:1-17 [There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “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.”]

Going deeper in one’s spiritual journey is not for the faint of heart.

Author Annie Dillard says it is the journey inward and downward, into the realm of the harshest realities of our lives—where grief,

and trauma, and failures and our deepest fears lurk—that enables us to discover the more true self, the one God created, the one we yearn to know and be, the one which has a shadow side, too. She said we must ride these monsters down and deal with them, hard as that work is.

If we fail to look at our shadow side, the side that doesn't like to have light shone on it, we risk feeding a dangerous and delusional false self—the one that convinces us that we always are well-intentioned in our actions with others, the one that convinces us that our use of power is always benign, and the one that convinces us that if there is any problem in the workplace, or family, or church, or any group, that problem is caused by “those people” who just don't get it.¹

The world encourages us to avoid these deeps at all costs, turning instead to focus on externalities of busy-ness, or passive entertainment designed to numb us, or shallow-end frivolity. We are all prone to these diversions, and in their most clever forms, they present as invitations to focus on a “worthy cause” or “good work”—not bad, in and of itself, of course—but how often do

we fall prey to the traps they set for us to inure ourselves into thinking we're all that?!

The Lenten journey is not for the faint of heart, because at its core, Lent is not about the externalities of taking more things on, however good they may be; Lent is about the journey in and down and through. Lent is about coming to realize once again that if we do not deal with the shadows within us, we will find a million ways to make someone “out there” the enemy and the cause of all our problems, and we will work mightily to bend them to our will in whatever ways we can, all in the cause of righteousness.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark of night to probe for answers to the questions that haunt him. Yes, he was a Pharisee, and no doubt he used his power as a religious leader to bend others to the will of the religious dominion, but all the assiduous observances of the law and ritualized rhythms of daily life were not enough for Nicodemus. He yearned for something more.

Jesus gives him answers that don't compute in his externalized worldview—born again, born from above, born of the Spirit. All metaphors inviting Nicodemus to the deeper spiritual journey.

¹ This sermon draws heavily on Palmer's essay referenced explicitly, and can be found at <https://couragerenewal.org/wp->

[content/uploads/2022/06/Parker-Palmer-leading-from-within.pdf](https://couragerenewal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Parker-Palmer-leading-from-within.pdf)

For centuries, many Christian preachers have used Nicodemus as the Lenten foil, the Jewish prop to ridicule for his ignorance in the conversation with Jesus. We can feel better about ourselves because we “get it” and he doesn’t. But we miss the point when we do. It’s just one more way to externalize our discomforts with going deeper.

I would suggest that each of us is invited to stand squarely in the story as Nicodemus, coming to Jesus in the dark of night, which is, you see, the realm of our shadowy monsters, the ones that lurk deep down, the ones that if left untended will manifest by day, cloaked as good things, but always trip us up. Let’s not fall prey to using Nicodemus as that other guy, that fool who doesn’t get it. Jesus is speaking to you and to me, with compassion, and says a very hopeful thing—that God loves this world, and everyone in it, and that God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

The Greek word translated here as world is *kosmos*, literally the entire universe which God created, and that all of it will be saved. This is good news, friends.

Every year at the beginning of Lent, I re-read an essay by Parker Palmer entitled *Leading from Within*. You can easily find it on a web search: Parker Palmer essay *Leading from*

Within. This year, I invited the senior leaders on staff to read it and discuss it in one of our monthly gatherings. It was as vibrant a conversation as I think we’ve had in my time here.

Palmer speaks of leaders needing to go in and down on this spiritual journey if they are going to be truly healthy leaders, casting less shadow and more light in our lives. I am convinced he is correct, and that this work is important for every person on their spiritual journey, which is why I am sharing it today, on this Second Sunday in Lent.

He names five shadows that trip us up time and again if we do not deal with them. He describes them in some detail; I will list them here briefly, hoping you might go and read the essay in full as part of your Lenten journey.

1. **Insecurity about identity and worth.** Many of us pour ourselves into the work product to convince us that our worth is derived by such externalities. But our worth is God-given, full stop. We are made in God’s image, claimed as beloved children of God, and part of that cosmos that the Son came to save.
2. **Believing the lie that the universe is inherently hostile**, and so we must approach the world as dualistic—winners and losers, allies and enemies,

for someone to win, someone must lose. The cosmos was not created that way.

3. **Functional atheism**—the fallacious belief that if anything good is going to happen, I must do it, leaving no room for God to act in and on our lives.
4. **Fear of chaos**—the need for control, to have everything so ordered, that we leave no room for the messiness that can lead to new, creative ways of being.
5. **Denial of death**—not just mortal death, but often a fear of failure that might mean a radical change. We resist it at all cost.

He writes about ways we often avoid this important work, but if we will, if we will go there and engage our shadows, we will unfurl

into the beautiful beings God created us to be, born anew into our truest selves.

Or back to the poetic way Annie Dillard puts it:

“if you ride these monsters down, if you drop with them farther over the world’s rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate... the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned.”²

It is the place of “hidden wholeness” to which Jesus invites Nicodemus, and you and me, and the entire cosmos.

Jesus says, follow me. I will show you the way.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

² As cited in Palmer's essay, *Ibid.*