

3.1.2026 "Walking in Faith and Trust" Dr. Janet Loman

Numbers 21:4-9 John 3.1-21

If any character from the Bible can represent twenty-first-century church members, it might be Nicodemus. In many ways he is a sympathetic character. He's a successful and self-confident religious man, he plays a leadership role in his community. He is spiritually open and curious, yet also rational. He approaches Jesus directly and tries to figure out Jesus' actions and social networks. He realizes that Jesus is from God, but he is not sure how he is related to God. He is committed and curious enough that he decides to talk with Jesus face to face. However, Nicodemus is not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus, so he goes in the middle of the night, when he can keep his faith secret, separated from the rest of his life. His imagination is caught by Jesus, but he wants to compartmentalize the faith he already has. Nicodemus is not yet ready to declare his faith in the light of day. He is not yet prepared to let it change his life. He is in a 'dark period' of his life of transformation.

Today, being a Nicodemus-like Christian is understandable. Believers, who have mixed marriages or pluralistic work settings, choose tolerance and mutual respect over witnessing, and these cultural norms have pushed religion into our private lives -- and for two centuries we have encouraged such behavior and attitudes.

We support public morality and an engagement in social issues, but that message has often been muffled by the culture, and as the metaphor of the "fish who doesn't recognize he is living in water" reminds us, we are completely unaware that we, too, are in cultural waters ourselves. If we are a Nicodemus-like Christian, who compartmentalizes our faith, it is not necessarily because we have somehow failed as individual believers. There is much to praise about a faith that thrives in the dark periods of our lives -- it is genuine, heartfelt, and deeply personal. Nicodemus, a seeker, finds himself a product of his Jewish culture -- living in that culture, yet attempting to see and understand a new way of life that is somewhat different from his present culture.

Nicodemus is a respected teacher of the Jews, a Pharisee, grounded in his faith. But he hears stories of Jesus and his miracles and signs and wants to meet him, because he realizes that Jesus is no ordinary prophet; Jesus has shown the culture new signs and miracles. Being so respected and prominent in his culture, Nicodemus realizes he cannot meet him in the light of day, in public, in front of those who look up to him as a Jewish man of faith. His culture prevents him from openly seeking Jesus, but his curiosity about all the fervor over Jesus is just too strong. So he plans to meet Jesus at night, in private. Nicodemus reveals his complete lack of understanding of being born again by water and the Spirit. Jesus tells Nicodemus,

"I solemnly assure you, unless a person is born of water and the spirit of God, that person cannot be a part of God's Kingdom. This is a different birth. Do not be confused that I

said you must be born a new person. God's spirit blows wherever it wants to blow. You may hear its sound, but you do not know what direction it comes from or in what direction it goes." Jesus is asking Nicodemus to let God work in his life, to trust God and declare his faith in the light of day.

Recently, a new friend and I were sharing our faith stories, and he told me that his family had never attended church. When he grew up and decided on a college, he chose a small, reputable school nearby, not realizing the school was supported by the Presbyterian church. As he met the student body, made friends, and learned their religious practices, he began attending the chapel services with them. He was first "drawn in" by the liturgy of the church. (And probably most importantly, he met his future wife there, who had been raised in the church!)

Liturgy is the "work of the people" during worship --

the Bible passages: the Psalms, which are songs of the personal prayers of God's people;
the hymns: which are also personal testimonies of faith and trust from Christians around the world and through the ages. The hymnal is a book of compact theology, which sings in beautiful and creative ways of our human connections with God. Also,
the prayers: both spoken and heard;
the Word of God: proclaimed in the sermon;
the fellowship: sharing faith and learning of and about faith from others --our human connection which each other through the Holy Spirit.

Faith is communicated by a community of believers

and the meaning of faith is shown by their history,
by their interaction with each other, and in relation to the events that take place in their lives.

ON THE ROAD TO THE PROMISED LAND, the Israelites' faith is dwindling. They have mumbled and grumbled to themselves, complained among each other, and finally, *they create an outright rebellion against Moses, and God. They have been fed when they were hungry and given sweet water when they were thirsty; they have been given all the requirements for survival; but they have forgotten their faithful Giver.*

God is suddenly "sick and tired" of the whole situation! How can his people forget and be so ungrateful after all he has done to feed them and give them water to drink? God becomes outraged and retaliates.

He has Moses place his huge bronze snake (which signifies God), on a pole.

He then sends poisonous snakes to bite; and those who did not look to the bronze snake for God to save them, died. Those who trusted God, lived. When the Israelites recognized their transgression, they came to Moses and asked for his intercession to God on their behalf. Most of the time a confession of sin requires us to recognize our behavior and that it has harmed others; and that forgiveness and healing are readily available, but faithful repentance, saying we are sorry, is necessary. This action of the people was not magic or idolatry, but faith, and no one could do it for another.

We as a congregation are walking in the wilderness, for after 22 years of safety and trust, we are in search of our next pastor, knowing from the beginning it will take about two years; so we have a few choices, here, as we wait.

We can lose faith and trust in God;

We can complain, cry, and rail against him

and become angry and rebellious with each other because things are "not the way they used to be";

We can join the "I want to go back to Egypt" crowd and give up this precarious walk through the desert with no guarantee of outcome;

Or we can look up to God our sovereign, loving God, who has blessed us with this church and its legacy of mission and service to our community for 200 years.

Our present situation has changed, but our mission will never change. It is the daily, even hourly, habit of turning to God and trusting that he is moving us forward, that will fulfill our mission.

It is by our faith and trust in each other that we are strengthened for the journey. It is in our willingness to support each other, to say "Yes" to finding solutions, or graciously helping with tasks in the life of our church.

The richest blessing we have been given in the last eight months since Norm departed is that so many of you have come forward to offer a sermon on Sunday morning.

Your testaments of "faith at work" in the church are beyond encouraging-- they are life- giving!

Hearing your faith stories has become our opportunity to see glimpses of our faith that abides with God and in each other. Your offerings strengthen our bonds as a family and builds trust in each other, which will sustain us through this journey.

Faith and trust in our shared experiences bring incredibly positive energy to the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit breathes us to life! The wind blows and excites the leaves on the trees. The voice of the Spirit speaks to the universe, but we know not how it comes or where it goes. **We must rest in the creative power that brings us to a new place of even more abundance and blessing.**

John writes in verse 14: "(. . .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." How can we be any richer than we are right now? It is God who sustains us as we work toward our goal. For without him we can bear no fruit.

God is saying to the Israelites, don't give up now! I've led you this far and you are giving up on me? This can't happen! If you can't seek my guidance and trust it, I will have to show you that death will ensue. Then where will you be? Look to me, repent, and remember whose you are!

God will keep you in perfect peace if your mind is fixed on him. If you are in Christ he will never let you go.

Being fixed on God doesn't mean we must be perfect; it means we know we are not perfect and will stay close to God for guidance.

God will **keep** your life. The word *keep* means more than finding a pretty rock in the desert, or a shell on the beach, that you put in your pocket and take home to glance at on your shelf from time to time. When God promises he will keep you, he means forever, in his heart.

Augustine prayed: You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

Come to the Table and be fed -- and find peace and reconciliation with God. **Amen.**