

I think Nicodemus gets a bad rap. He is often portrayed as the cautious one, the one who sneaks around at night, the one who just does not quite understand what Jesus is saying.

But Nicodemus is not some spiritually shallow guy. He is a Pharisee, a leader, a teacher of Israel. He has given his life to studying Scripture. He has spent decades thinking carefully about God. He carries responsibility. People look to him for guidance.

We, too, have been shaped by years of faith. We have ways of thinking about God that have formed us. We have patterns of prayer, assumptions about how Scripture works, and categories that have helped us make sense of the world. Some of those ways of thinking have carried us through hard seasons. They have been faithful guides for us on how to live and move about in the world.

So when Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, maybe it is not simply sneaking around so he won't be seen with this radical teacher. Maybe it is about finally having space to lay his role down. To admit that even after all these years of study, there are things he does not fully understand.

He begins generously. *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God."* Nicodemus has a niggling sense that something significant is happening. He sees that God is at work in Jesus. He wants to get closer to Jesus.

But sensing is not the same thing as understanding.

We are going to notice something over the next few weeks of Lent. In each of our readings, someone is being asked to make a choice. Last week, it was Jesus in the wilderness. Faced with power, certainty, and control, he chose trust. This week, the choice is less dramatic, but no less important. In Nicodemus, we see a faithful scholar deciding whether he will open his heart or protect what he already knows.

When Jesus says, *"You must be born from above,"* Nicodemus does what scholars do. He tries to reason it through. He takes it literally. He looks for the mechanics. *"How can this be?"*

It is not easy for him to hear what Jesus is saying. Not because he is stubborn. Not because he lacks faith. It is hard because he has spent his entire life thinking in a particular way. His framework has served him well. It has helped him lead faithfully. And now Jesus is inviting him into a life beyond it.

When Jesus says, *"Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"* I do not hear scolding. I hear an invitation. I hear Jesus saying, You know the Scriptures. You know these stories. It is time to let them open up and breathe.

Then Jesus speaks of wind. *"The wind blows where it chooses. You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."*

Wind. Pneuma. Ruach. Spirit. Breath. Something alive. Something moving. Something that cannot be controlled or reduced to textbook explanations.

And here is the choice in front of Nicodemus. He can retreat into what he already understands. Or he can stay in the conversation. He can close down his imagination. Or he can let himself be stretched.

We, too, have frameworks. We have ideas about how God is supposed to work. And sometimes the Spirit nudges us beyond them. That Spirit, she is like that. She does not want us to get too comfortable or too certain. Not necessarily to discard everything we have believed, but to deepen us.

It is hard to loosen our grip on ways of thinking that have shaped us for years. Even when those ways have been good. Even when they have been faithful. But wind does not necessarily tear everything down. It moves things. It shifts what has been settled. It carries seeds to new places.

Nicodemus is not being asked to abandon his faith. He is being invited to let it loose and allow it to grow.

Somewhere along the way, many of us absorbed the idea that questioning God is dangerous. That faith means certainty. That wrestling with Scripture signals weakness or even sin. But the story of our faith says otherwise.

Jacob wrestles and walks away limping and blessed. The psalms argue with God. Job protests. Mary asks, *"How can this be?"* Nicodemus asks, *"How can this be?"* Wrestling is not a sign that faith is failing. It is a sign that faith is alive.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote, *"Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."*

Maybe that is what Nicodemus is doing. Living the question. Staying in the conversation long enough for the Spirit to do its work.

So maybe Scripture, and the foundations we bring with us, are not meant to shut down the conversation. Maybe they are meant to start one. Maybe God is not looking for passive agreement. Maybe God is inviting relationship. And relationship always leaves room for our questions.

And even that is a choice. To stay in relationship. To keep asking. To resist the temptation to shut it all down when it feels uncomfortable.

For me, this is where Psalm 121 fits. It begins with a question. *"I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where is my help to come?"*

From where will our help come?

We know what keeps us awake at night. The responsibilities we carry. The health concerns. The uncertainties about the future. The quiet wondering about our own faith. It questions we ask in the night.

And the psalm answers, *"My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth."* The Lord is our keeper. *"The One who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night."*

When we are awake, God is not asleep. When we are wrestling, God is not impatient. When we are stretching beyond old ways of thinking, God is not withdrawing from our side.

The Psalm gives us stability. The Keeper is awake. The Gospel gives us movement. The wind is blowing.

We live between those two truths. We are kept close and being moved. We are held, and we are being born into something new.

Nicodemus sensed that Jesus had come from God. That was true. But it was only the beginning. And that is true for us as well. Our sensing, our believing, our years of faithfulness are not the end of the journey. They are the ground from which new growth can come.

And here is the hopeful part. Nicodemus grows. Over time, he speaks up. Over time, he becomes more public. What begins as a nighttime conversation becomes a display of courage.

And that gives us hope.

Lent is not about giving something up. It is about choosing something. Choosing to stay. Choosing to listen. Choosing to let the wind move us. Choosing to come, even at night. Choosing to lift our eyes and ask where help will come from.

The wind may not give us tidy answers. But it will keep us moving. We do not have to resolve every doubt before we pray. We don't have to show up on Sundays looking like we have it all together. God simply invites us to stay in the conversation.

We are not keeping vigil alone. Our Keeper is awake. And the Spirit is still moving through us.

Amen.