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5 March 2023
Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, NYC

Year A, Lent 2, Sunday: Solemn Mass
Genesis 12:1–8; Psalm 33:18–22; Romans 4:1–5, 13–17; John 3:1–17

Today in our Gospel lesson we hear about Nicodemus. He’s a Pharisee, probably a member of the Sanhedrin, a council of Jewish religious leaders, and he comes to see Jesus by night. Presumably, at night, because he doesn’t want anyone else to know what he’s up to. We hear that he already acknowledges that Jesus “come[s] from God” and that “God is with him.” He wants to learn more. We could say that he’s coming in from the darkness of night and approaching Jesus, the light, “the true light” that came “into the world.”¹

Nicodemus will appear again in two more of John’s scenes. Four chapters later, the Pharisees are upset with the temple police for not arresting Jesus. Nicodemus defends Jesus and reprimands his colleagues by saying that according to the law, one doesn’t judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out the truth.² Then, near the end of John, when Joseph of Arimathea comes to retrieve Jesus’ body, Nicodemus is there as well. He brings myrrh and aloes so that Jesus’ body is properly cared for.³

While not explicitly within the text, there’s enough room to imagine Nicodemus as making spiritual progress throughout these scenes in John. We don’t know for sure where it’s going, though there are some apocryphal accounts that describe him as converting to Christianity, getting expelled from the Sanhedrin, and dying as a martyr for the faith.⁴ But, we don’t know. Nevertheless, even if we don’t definitively know what comes next in his story, in the passage we heard, Nicodemus does show that he wants to learn more. He asks Jesus questions.

Nicodemus wants to learn more about the “unchangeable truth,” “the Word”—to use some language from our Collect of the Day. But, while the Son is unchangeable, Nicodemus is changeable, and Jesus talks to him about transformation. Jesus talks to him about being “born anew,” but Nicodemus misses the point.

Jesus uses an adverb in Greek (ἄνωθεν) that has two meanings, though Nicodemus only hears one of them. It can be translated as “again”—that’s what Nicodemus

¹ John 1:9.

² John 7:45-52.

³ John 19:38-40.

⁴ David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 963.

hears—though it can also be translated as “from above.”⁵ Nicodemus hears, “born again,” but doesn’t yet understand that Jesus is talking about being “born again, from above.”

From there, Jesus continues, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” The “water” seems to be a rather clear allusion to baptism, even if some scholars argue that “water” was a later addition by members of John’s community.⁶ Maybe, though it fits in as this passage is followed by a portion on John the Baptist, who earlier talked about how Jesus would be the one to baptize with the Holy Spirit.⁷ And, it’s also consistent with how baptism is discussed elsewhere in the New Testament.⁸

So, regardless, with Nicodemus’ inquiries, along with this imagery of baptism and rebirth, I find myself thinking about the relationship of the catechumenate in the early Church to our own journey now through the season of Lent. That train of thought may need some explaining.

Catechumens were those enrolled in a program of preparation, which ultimately led to baptism—that is, those who were receiving catechesis (κατήχησις), a Greek word for instruction or preparation.⁹ It often would last years.

Though the details varied geographically throughout the early Church, the writings of St. Augustine provide at least a snapshot of what things looked like in 4th century North Africa. Receiving instruction in the faith was part of being a catechumen, but it also involved a complex set of rituals and practices that were designed train the person in the Christian way of life—to begin to transform them.¹⁰

When a person was ready to take the next step—to take the plunge so to speak—to live their lives as a Christian—there was a more advanced catechumenate for those who were preparing for their upcoming baptism. There were several names for it throughout the Church. Augustine referred to them as the *competentes*—competent, suitable, those who were ready.

It’s this period of formation that has some relationship with what, also around the time of Augustine, evolved into the forty days of Lent. The *competentes* underwent a

⁵ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 92.

⁶ The rest of the passage focuses on the Spirit without again mentioning water. Francis J. Moloney, *Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 4: 99.

⁷ John 1:33.

⁸ For example, Paul says that “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13) and he compares baptism to dying and rising again in Christ (Romans 6:1-4).

⁹ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 534.

¹⁰ Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine through the Ages* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 145.

three-week period of intense preparation prior to their baptism, and it took place at different times of the year, depending on when a local church had baptisms.¹¹ In some places, baptism already had an association with Easter. Though all the details aren't fully understood by scholars—some of it is murky—Lent likely evolved, at least partially, out of this period of preparation in places where baptism already had a link with Easter.¹²

In Augustine's writings, there is this connection. He describes how the *competentes*, those who were ready to live their lives as Christians, were then further prepared for baptism: there was daily fasting until 3 PM; they abstained from meat and wine; participated in all-night prayer vigils; gave alms to the poor; underwent exorcisms; and they learned and memorized the Creed, which they then recited back at the Easter Vigil, where they were finally baptized.¹³

Now, I can tell you some of the details about when I was baptized—it was All Saints' Day. I know that and I know the name of the parish in Connecticut and who the priest was and so on, but it's only because I've been told. I don't actually remember a single thing about it and there certainly wasn't a catechumenate to prepare me. I was still a baby and definitely not enrolled with the *competentes*.

In fact, it was shortly after the time of Augustine that infant baptism became pretty much the standard and this whole concept of a catechumenate fell away. Fortunately, we do have Lent. And, fortunately, we have it every year and it isn't a single one-off preparation. At least, one season of it wouldn't be enough for me to be worked on.

Yet, I'm wondering what it would be like if we approached Lent in the mindset of a catechumen who was ready to take the next step of being enrolled with the *competentes*. There would be an aspect of learning, surely, but change would be the focus. It would mean saying that I think I'm ready to live my life in the way that God intends it. It would mean asking God to use this period to transform me, to help me to get there.

It would involve seeing within our Lenten practices both concepts from that Greek adverb Jesus used with Nicodemus: “again” and “from above”. We would be coming to Lent, “again,” doing these things “again,” but to be changed “from above.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

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¹¹ Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 240.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages*, 148-149.