

Second Sunday in Lent, Year A
A Sermon Preached by Fr Ian M Delinger
on March 1, 2026

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

*May my words be acceptable to God;
faithful to the teachings of Christ;
and inspired by the Holy Spirit;
that we may be blessed by the same Triune God.*

I'm going to start my sermon with a follow-up story to the Gospel:

Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

John 19:38-42

This is the Gospel Reading for Holy Saturday, and the 3rd and final time that Nicodemus is mentioned. Joseph of Arimathea was a *secret* disciple of Jesus, and Nicodemus visited Jesus by night in order to be in secret. Both of them wanted to be followers of Jesus, but feared some sort of stigma or retribution if there were to be “out” as followers.

How true is that for many of us today? How often do we compartmentalize our faith for fear of what people will think?

What are you doing this weekend? Asks a friend.

Oh, I've got some things in the morning, and then going to brunch with some friends, and then going to a matinee at The PAC.

Let's meet for drinks on Thursday, suggests another.

OK, but it will have to be a bit later. I have a meeting until 7pm.

Should we invite Fr Ian to your 70th birthday party?

No! He'll wear his collar and talk about church to everyone!

I'm no different, if I'm honest. Some situations just do not lend themselves to letting everyone know that I'm a priest! Let me share a vulnerable moment I had last November when I was at my Spanish Class in Puerto Vallarta. Some fellow students invited me to join them at a comedy drag show. I had never been to a comedy drag show, but I know that the performers like to banter with the crowd and then fixate on any characteristic that sticks out.

The first few people she called out were in a group, and she had fun with them which got my anxiety level rising, because there we were in the front row, and I was next! But I had a plan! In the fullness of her drag persona, Hedda Lettuces, as she is known, stared straight at me and asked:

What's your name, sir?

George.

And where are you from?

Chicago.

Oh...do you know them!?!?

No.

And what do you do?

I'm an accountant.

Oh. OK.

And she moved on. SUCCESS! This was *neither* the time nor the place to spread the gospel or to be ridiculed for doing so.

But if I were – dare I say – more serious about being a witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ, telling her that I am a priest *may have* illustrated to the crowd that it was OK to be a Christian and attend a comedy drag show. I may have shown the overwhelming majority of LGBTQ+ audience members that parts of the Church are OK with them and include them as *us*. Someone who needed a pastor at that moment might have approached me after the show. But I didn't let any of that happen.

Instead, I prevented a good 10min of the show focusing on me and what I do for a living and probably stories of maltreatment at church of the performer as a child. Remaining in the dark prevented resurrecting the anxieties of audience members about their bad experiences with the Church and with Christians. Nobody cares about the lives of an accountant [*sorry, accountants*], but many people like to interrogate and sometimes harass clergy. So, I get it. I understand Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus concealing their following of Jesus.

But Jesus is much more demanding than we are sometimes comfortable with.

“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,” Jesus said to Nicodemus.

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?”

To be born again of the Spirit is to be confident in your faith in Jesus Christ and to not hide that light under a bushel basket. Jesus bluntly tells Nicodemus that he needs to step out of the darkness and into the light. But to Nicodemus, that would risk his reputation as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. Jesus wants us to live our faith openly, in the light.

Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

As many leaders in The Episcopal Church have pointed out, particularly former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, bringing your faith into the light doesn't mean that you have to be an obnoxious proselytizer. But you *can be* your authentic self in public, which includes your faith as a Christian. But we are so deeply uncomfortable with that, so we come by night like Nicodemus, or in secret like Joseph of Arimathea.

A good real-time example of faith out in the light is Prayers & Pastries on Mondays. We actually pray in public and talk about our faith very publicly. We don't stand on a box with a megaphone, but we do gather in a café where there are other people. Over these 3yrs, I have noticed a change in comfort level with this public display of faith.

When we were first getting started, there was a reticence to say the Psalm, the Canticle and the Lord's Prayer at regular volume. But over time, the confidence has come. It has helped that The Bridge Café is operated by Restorative Partners, because Sr Theresa, whom everyone in SLO knows, always comes to our table on the rare occasion when she is there. It feels like she is legitimizing our presence, when from her perspective, what we are doing is perfectly normal, and she is simply grateful that we are patronizing this well-deserved establishment.

My Masters dissertation is in Public Theology, so I am very interested in 'doing theology' in public and the response of the public to that. So, I have also noticed the comfort level of *others* around us. We met for Prayer & Pastries in a different café once, and as soon as I said, "*Pull out your prayer books,*" a couple of people around us picked up their belongings and moved to tables outside. Granted, there could have been other reasons for that, but their discomfort was noticeable. It's that kind of response, and perhaps the potential for more demonstrative responses, that causes us to keep our faith in the dark.

I must give a shout-out to Molly and Elijah who host the Campus Ministry Pop-Up on the Cal Poly Campus. While they are not overt about the Christian affiliation of their offering of snacks at

an open and affirming campus ministry actively working to provide a place of rest and nourishment on campus for students,

if one pays attention, the pop-up is branded with The Episcopal Church and St Stephen's. And considering the religious dynamics on campus, it can sometimes feel like it would be easier to come to Jesus in the dark.

When asked to reflect on the story of Nicodemus in relation to their work with Pop-Up, this is what Molly had to say:

Often it feels like there are two views, one where people see church and think homophobic and conservative and, like, scary person. And so they stay away. And the other view sees our affirming and open and welcoming aspect, and thinks of us as bad Christians and also stays away. So for someone who is in the center of these two junctions, I often want to keep that concealed. But then when having to be someone who's sharing our campus ministry and letting people know that we are a place that exists. I have to make sure I elaborate and be like, yes, we are an intersection between these two. Like, this is a possibility.

Molly and Elijah are bringing their faith out into the light when they do Pop-Up. And just because they are younger, it doesn't make it any easier for them to express their faith, particularly in what is often an openly hostile environment. As Molly said in that clip: On one side, there are those who see that the Pop-Up is sponsored by the Church and avoid the Pop-Up because it's the Church, and then on the other hand, there are those who see the Pop-Up and think that the open and welcoming position is *not Christian* and avoid them *or* verbally accost them.

Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were afraid of that happening to them. We are afraid of that happening to us. But Jesus calls us into the light. He calls us to be born of the Spirit and bring our faith into the light. When we step into the light, we are bringing Christ to the world. What we bring into the light is not actually about us or our insecurities. What we bring into the light is the truth that:

*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.*

Sometimes it is more convenient and more comfortable to keep our faith in Jesus in the dark. But Jesus calls us to be born again, to allow the Spirit to guide us to bring our faith into the light. And it's hard and uncomfortable. But we live in a place where it is completely safe to be *out* as a Christian, to acknowledge 'in the light' that you are a follower of Christ. It's part of who you are, part of your true self. And as we work through the discomfort of bringing our faith out into the light, we have the comfort that:

*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through Him.*

That is Good News, indeed! This Lent, may you take baby steps to bring your faith into the light and show to those around you that:

*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.*