

Nicodemus

John 3:1-21

*Year A Lent 2 (Revised);
Year A Lent 2 (Episcopal);
Year B Trinity Sunday ;
Year A Trinity Sunday
(Catholic); Year B Lent 4
(Revised); Year B Lent 4
(Catholic)*



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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4	5	6
▲	Chuza - the open-minded, intellectually curious manager of Herod's household	●		■		▲	
▲	Nicodemus - a member of the ruling council who secretly speaks with Jesus one night	▲		▲		■	
▲	Joanna - the wife of Chuza, who will later become one of Jesus disciples	▲		▲		▲	
▲	Joseph - Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the ruling council with a sincere interest in Jesus	▲		■		■	
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor		▲		●		▲
▲	Jesus		●		▲		▲
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)		●		●		▲
▲	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples		▲		▲		▲

Scene 1

Chuza , Joanna , Joseph , Nicodemus

{Four members of the Israeli elite, two religious leaders and the stewards of Herod's house, meet for a regular lunch. Nicodemus arrives late.}

Chuza *[cheerfully]* There you are!

Nicodemus *[distractedly]* Sorry. I...I lost track of the time.

Joanna Don't worry, there's still plenty of food!

Joseph *[to Nicodemus in concerned tones]* You don't look very well.

Nicodemus Sorry, I...I'm a little short on sleep.

Chuza Another all night session?

Joanna It seems like every week, either you or Joseph show up half asleep because of some crisis.

Nicodemus No, that wasn't it this time.

Joseph Then what was it? Is everything all right with the family?

Nicodemus Yes, yes. *[after a pause]* All right, I'll tell you, but you must promise to keep this a secret.

Chuza Of course. We've shared many secrets around this table, haven't we?

Joanna Enough to get us all crucified, probably.

Joseph It's tragic when the most important matters can only be talked about outside the official chambers of the Council. *[to Chuza and Joanna]* You may do more for the nation through your informal channels than we do in all our slow deliberations.

Joanna *[darkly]* We do our share of evil, too, don't forget.

Chuza Herod does the evil! We do our best to mitigate that evil.

Joanna *[to Nicodemus]* Is that the nature of what you have to tell us today? Is it about the health of the nation?

Nicodemus *[uncertainly]* Maybe. I'm not sure. *[after a pause]* I was up late last night speaking with Joshua of Nazareth.

Scene 2

James , Jesus , Judas , Matthew

{Back at the disciples' camp.}

Judas Rabbi, how'd your talk go last night?

Jesus Very well. Thanks for setting it up.

James What talk?

Judas A member of the council asked me to get him a private audience with the rabbi.

Matthew *[alarmed]* Council? You mean the ruling council?

Judas Yes. Do you have a problem with that?

Matthew I don't see why we should be having anything to do with that lot.

James Hey, friends in high places can never hurt!

Matthew Not when our very mission is to tear those high places down!

Judas It's possible this guy would have no problem with that. He did ask to speak to the rabbi secretly, after all. I got the distinct impression he didn't want his peers to know what he was doing.

James *[to Jesus]* Was that the case? Was he a secret rebel against the council?

Jesus Maybe. I'm not sure. We didn't really talk about politics.

Matthew What *did* you talk about?

Jesus Rebirth.

Scene 3

Chuza , Joanna , Joseph , Nicodemus

Chuza I can't believe you got to talk privately with Joshua of Nazareth!

Joanna You should have told us. I would have loved to have tagged along.

Nicodemus I was taking my life in my hands to even talk to him! I didn't want to drag anyone else into it.

Chuza But he's just another teacher, isn't he? The exciting new teacher everyone's buzzing about, sure, but still just another teacher. Isn't he?

{Nicodemus doesn't answer for a while. Joseph finally steps in to respond.}

Joseph There have been some...questions raised about him. In Council.

Joanna Really? What kinds of questions?

Joseph Primarily whether he's claiming to be the Messiah. And if so, what should be done about it.

Chuza *[incredulously]* They think he might be the Messiah?

Nicodemus They think he might be claiming it.

Joanna But why would that make him dangerous to talk to? If anything, it makes it rather essential to talk to him, to get the answer.

Joseph That depends on whether you really want it.

Chuza And the Council doesn't? But I thought you said that questions had been raised.

Joseph By me, I must admit. I've tried several times to propose an investigation, but not only have I been voted down, I've been warned - we've all been warned - not to try contacting the man on my own.

Joanna Nicodemus, that *was* brave of you, then.

Nicodemus Please don't let anyone know what I did!

Joanna Of course.

Chuza Well, it's typical Council head-in-the-sand behavior. They don't want to face the difficult job of dealing with a false Messiah, even though a false Messiah could cause everybody much more trouble down the line. And there's even a chance he's not claiming it, and everybody could just relax. But no, they'd rather just ignore the whole situation and hope it goes away all by itself.

Joseph *[earnestly]* Chuza, do you believe those are the only two possibilities?

Chuza In broad strokes, sure. What else is there? He's either claiming to be the Messiah or he isn't.

Joseph What if he's claiming to be the Messiah and he is?

Chuza But that's absurd! The Messiah is a myth.

Nicodemus Do you think so?

Chuza Of course. It's self evident, isn't it? *[after a pause]* Isn't it? *[looking around after a long silence]* Nobody at this table believes in that stuff, do they?

Joseph I do. That's why I believe it's so urgent to open up communications with this man. Yes, there's the risk that he's a false Messiah who'll bring the Romans down on us, and that's certainly a strong reason to act now, but there's also the risk that he *is* the Messiah and we'll let him pass us by.

Chuza *[in wonder]* Joseph, we've been friends for - I can't even count the years - and I never knew you believed in those old prophecies.

Joanna *[to Joseph]* I wish for your sake you'd been able to go with Nicodemus after all. But at least we have his report. *[to Nicodemus]* So what's the answer? Did he claim to be the Messiah last night?

Nicodemus Not exactly. Not in so many words.

Chuza *[cheerfully]* Well, there you go!

Nicodemus *[interrupting]* Nevertheless, I believe he is!

Scene 4

James , Jesus , Judas , Matthew

Judas Rebirth?

Jesus Yes. I told him that no one could enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless they were born again.

James Born again? How can a man be born again? What's he going to do, jump back into his mother's womb and pop out again?

Matthew *[to Jesus]* You mean spiritually, don't you?

Jesus You must be born not just of water, but of the Spirit to enter the Kingdom.

James Born of water?

Judas That's just being born, physically. I'd like to hear more about this spiritual birth, though. What does it have to do with the new kingdom we hope to usher in?

Jesus The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but cannot tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everybody born of the Spirit.

Judas What does that even mean?

Matthew That it isn't just going to be a political kingdom. That it's not just going to be a military victory. Before Israel can be liberated, it must be renewed. It's because of our corruption as a nation that we're in bondage again. Until we repent, there can be no true deliverance.

James Is that it, rabbi? Is that what you meant?

Scene 5

Chuza , Joanna , Joseph , Nicodemus

Chuza Okay, so he talked about spiritual rebirth. There's nothing new in that. Sounds like borrowings from certain pagan mystery religions.

Joseph If it was, then maybe those pagans were wiser about the world of the spirit than we are. Rebirth, renewal, resurrection even: it's exactly what this nation needs.

Joanna *[wistfully, almost half to herself]* I sometimes wish I could be born all over again myself.

Chuza *[teasingly]* Getting tired of me, dear?

Joanna *[seriously]* Maybe I'm getting tired of *me*.

Joseph What else did he say?

Nicodemus He said that God sent his son in the world save it, and that those who believe in him will be saved, but that those who don't believe are condemned already, because they haven't believed in the only son of God.

Chuza That doesn't seem very reasonable. What about those who never hear about him, or who are still undecided. They're condemned already?

Joseph It may be unreasonable, but should we expect Reality to accommodate our sense of fair play? If there is a Messiah, and if he's not just an ideal or a philosophy but an actual person in an actual time and place, and tasked with a specific mission, then of course people might miss out on him, for all kinds of unfair reasons. That's why I've been so urgent in council. Some people seem to think that if he's really the Messiah, we shouldn't have to lift a finger to find out, that he should come knocking on our doors like...well, like a *false* messiah might.

Joanna *[to Joseph]* I see what you mean, but *[to Nicodemus]* is that what *he* meant? Was that your sense of it?

Nicodemus Not exactly. He went on to talk about how light has come into the world, but people prefer darkness because they're evil. But those who live by the truth seek out the light.

Chuza Dark and light. Nothing new, there, either. Many religions use that kind of imagery.

Joseph I'm not sure I understand its significance.

Nicodemus I think it was his answer to the unfairness Chuza saw. I think he meant to say that no, it's not unfair at all, because anyone who lives by the truth will naturally seek him out and find him.

Joanna While those who don't find him must have been evil to start with? Ugh.

Chuza I must say, this fellow's not sounding very promising at all.

Joseph *[to Nicodemus]* Yet, you've come to believe in him. Why?

Nicodemus It's hard to explain. It wasn't so much what he said, as how he said it. He didn't speak like he was a teacher passing on knowledge to me, or a preacher trying to persuade me to some action or belief. He just reported these things first hand, like you might tell me about what your job involved, or how your vacation went last month. He spoke to me not *about* the Son of God, but *as* the Son of God.

Scene 6

James , Jesus , Judas , Matthew

Jesus This is what I told him about the Kingdom: that as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted, that everyone who believes might have eternal life in him.

James As Moses lifted up the snake? What snake?

Matthew You know. When the children of Israel rebelled and were bitten by snakes, and God told Moses to make a bronze snake and set it up on a pole, and all those who looked to it were healed.

James Oh, right, yeah. *[to Jesus]* I'm not sure you should be comparing yourself to a snake, though!

Judas Or picturing the snake being lifted up on a pole. It's a little too evocative of crucifixion!

James How did the guy react? Do you think he's going to support us on the Council now?

Jesus I doubt it. He was terrified to be seen with me; that's why he came by night. And I suspect he'll want to continue in secrecy.

Judas Coward! The powerful are always the biggest wimps. Might he at least contribute some cash? I'm sure he's got plenty, and he could totally donate in secrecy.

Jesus Maybe. He has friends with money, as well, and now they'll be hearing about me through him.

Matthew Do we even want their money?

James Why wouldn't we?

Matthew It's dirty!

James You think all money is dirty.

Matthew And it is! But this man's money the more so, because he gained it collaborating with the Romans, and overseeing the moral corruption of the nation.

Judas All the more reason to take some of it from him and put it to better use.

James What do you say, rabbi? Should we take his money?

Jesus He hasn't even offered any yet! But whatever help he might offer in the future, I'll gladly accept.

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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