

No one is in charge of their own birth (John 3:1-17)

## **Nicodemus's problem is the power of evil, and he can't find his own way out of it.**

by [Thomas G. Long](#)

May 25, 2018

To receive these posts by e-mail each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

What to make of Nicodemus? Is he a spiritual seeker, a bumbler, a spy from the Sanhedrin?

One possibility, raised in a provocative essay by Michael Whinton in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, is that perceptive first readers of John would have spotted Nicodemus immediately as a familiar literary type: the suspicious dissembler. The clues are all there: his oily flattery ("Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God..."), his feigned amazement ("How can anyone be born after having grown old?"), his studied ignorance ("How can these things be?"). To the alert reader, then, Nicodemus comes across as fake news, a liar and a sneak.

Maybe. John is a master of ambiguity, and he makes it difficult to assess clearly Nicodemus's motives, to discern his inner character. I think for John the real issue is not what we can catch Nicodemus *at*, but what we catch Nicodemus *in*. Whether at this point in his life he's a struggling soul or a conniving manipulator is almost beside the point. He is, as John would have us know, a creature of the night. He is caught *in* the darkness, and that means that, in this scene, he is *of* the darkness and cannot on his own escape.

In the 1986 movie *Three Amigos*, Steve Martin, Chevy Chase, and Martin Short play silent-film stars who make westerns. When the tiny Mexican village of Santo Poco

comes under the threat of the vicious bandit El Guapo, through a series of misunderstandings the desperate villagers comes to believe that the three actors are actual gunslingers who will save them from their plight.

[In one scene](#), Lucky Day (Martin) stands to address the villagers, and as they cast their urgently hopeful eyes toward this potential savior, he gives a speech that always makes me wince. It's hilarious, but it sounds agonizingly close to much of my own preaching. "In a way, all of us have an El Guapo to face," he begins. (Oh Lord, how many times have I said something similar in a sermon?) "For some, shyness might be their El Guapo. For others, a lack of education." Unfortunately, Lucky concludes, for us it's the real El Guapo, "a big, dangerous guy who wants to kill us."

Just so, unfortunately for Nicodemus, his problem is not a lack of education, low self-esteem, or an imprecise theological outlook. His problem is the real El Guapo, the power of the night that shrouds all humanity. Dissembler or saint-in-process, it hardly matters. His a creature of the night and even though he finds his way into a conversation with Jesus, he cannot find his own way into the light.

Writing on this text years ago, Everett Falconer observed that "the most superficial thing that can be attempted in the name of religion" is to call on someone "to turn over a new leaf, to be better, to be different"—and that is not what Jesus suggests. In fact, he suggests that Nicodemus needs not to re-tool but to be reborn, and no one, of course, is in charge of one's own birth. Birth—new birth—is given to us, not achieved.

"Whether people serve themselves or serve others is not in their power to choose," said theologian Arthur McGill. "This is decided wholly in terms of the world in which they think they live. In New Testament terms, they live or die according to the king that holds them and the kingdom to which they belong." What Jesus offers Nicodemus—and the rest of humanity—is a new birth, a new kingdom to which to belong, and salvation from "the real El Guapo," the power of evil.