My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our Lenten minds, hearts, Spirits and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Throughout the Gospel of John, despite the signs of God’s presence in Jesus, people are still trying to make sense of him by this-world standards. We don’t need to psycho-analyze Nicodemus too hard in this passage: he’s a faithful follower of God, someone who heard about the wedding at Cana just before our passages today and he wants to know more. Nicodemus is impressed with what Jesus is doing, and he represents many of us on our journey of faith: curious, but when up against it, cautious. He brings questions, sure, but with some hesitation (remember, he comes at night). Faith, he thinks, comes from weighing the evidence and drawing logical, sane conclusions.

So Jesus does what he has done to his first disciples—he invites Nicodemus into a wilderness. No, not a geographic one. But a wilderness space has many unknowns, is not well mapped or marked. It even has hazards and things which might harm us—lions, and tigers, and bears (oh, my).

Jesus invites Nicodemus to a place where Nicodemus might be required to give up what he knows about his soul and spirit, going to an inner wilderness where everything he has learned and knows may, in effect, have to change.

Now, the important thing about this scripture, I hope you have discerned by now, is that as we travel with Nicodemus it’s not a story about him. It’s a story about us, isn’t it? This cautiousness about encountering God with us—Immanuel, the incarnate God, the word that becomes flesh—maybe we’d be a little skeptical, too, in hearing about or seeing the presence of God in all its pureness and glory. This story holds a mirror up to our own selves and souls once again, because that’s what Jesus does best. He beckons us to unfamiliar places and just says to trust him, or in Jesus-speak, “Be Not Afraid”.

And yet, let’s not get distracted. We want to believe in a faith that has signs and wonders, healing and exorcism, water into wine, multiplication of loaves and fishes.

But that’s not why Jesus came is it? Jesus didn’t come to amaze us, but that’s why Nicodemus is here, to find out how that comes about. Jesus doesn’t waste any time. While Nicodemus tries to make sense of what he’s seen through his experiential eyes, Jesus comes from a different place entirely. It’s why the Greek word in this scripture means “from above” but also “again”. And John’s Gospel uses word-play like this a lot.

Nicodemus is talking about this world, born-again. Jesus is talking about God and Spirit, born from-above. Jesus uses the inept question of this-world interpretation “how…” to set up God’s Kingdom and its wonder. There is a lost-in-translation aspect here, as Jesus answers of being born of water and Spirit. Its baptism, in which we are entered into God’s birth of Spirit within us, where we accept God’s blessing and become disciples for life. But let’s be clear again here: John’s theology always points to life coming from God’s side, and though God seeks, we are the ones who have to enter. There is a mutuality in which Jesus is talking about the Johanine Church and Nicodemus represents the unbelieving outsiders.

What did we say about baptism back in January? Other than it’s been a long time since we talked about it? In that act, washing away the old self, dissolving acts that separate us from God, drowning sin, we say yes to the Spirit’s presence and gift. We’re practicing what it means to die and be resurrected, the “born from above” Jesus talks about here. Just as long as when waters of our baptism dry off a few minutes later, our souls don’t dry off too.

So being born of Spirit and having that imbued part of God in us is quite different. The word Jesus uses to say that the wind blows where it chooses is actually the same word that means “breath of God”. Just as the breath of God hovered over the deep at creation in Genesis, so that very breath also is now also in us, of us, and through us. Being born from above, in Spirit living, every time we inhale, we take in God’s breath. Being born from above is not about dipping our toes in the Jordan and never thinking about it again as they do in the many tourist buses to the Holy Land. It’s about coming to a new understanding of our entire being, but that is renewed each time we breathe in the breath of life; over and over again we are given to God with each breath we take with that breath that permeates, nourishes, and makes the very cells of our bodies function.

This isn’t abstract, either. We should be aware of the dangers of breathing unhealthy air. In a war zone, each side clamors to kill with God on their side. I remember my grandfather’s stories of WWI when the gas came to take the lives of nearly half his comrades who couldn’t affix their masks in time. Or my seeing the hillsides of Kellogg, Idaho, as a young college student where a lead smelter labored for years to pump out the material which helped make modern plumbing possible, while at the same time killing all the vegetation in the valley, the fish in the stream, and giving over 30% of the children birth defects over the 60 years it was kept active, all in the name of profits and progress.

My grandmother talked of the tuberculosis hospital where she worked, where even the strongest man could be laid to waste by the first disease that mandated masks in our shared memory. Breathing bad, stale, infected air today is only marginally less deadly. But this isn’t a public health lecture. I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, “why are you surprised? We can’t see the wind, but we know when it’s at work; the grasses and leaves move, and we hear it in the trees. We cannot see the Spirit, but we can know when it’s at work, because we see what it moves and its results.”

We see Godly work in others, the Mother Teresas and Desmond Tutus of the world, because we see the Spirit’s work in them. So maybe if we fill ourselves up with the Spirit, we can do things what people see in us.

The Spirit takes ordinary, everyday us, and fills us with that power from above that only God provides. None of the folks I just mentioned were born with more smarts or physical abilities that Nicodemus’ world values. But they chose to allow God’s breath to permeate their being and became transformed, born from above.

Lent is just the beginning of that transformative work. We don’t need to know the endpoint. But we know there’s an image of God in us that waits for good, clean air. Breathe deeply, friends; be born anew, from God’s side, this and each day.

Thanks be to God, Amen.