

Sunday, March 18, 2012: John 3:14-21

by [Casey Thompson](#) in the [March 7, 2012](#) issue

During college I was a member of the Flying Couch Potatoes, jugglers extraordinaire and comedy novices. I remember those performances fondly. We were more enthusiastic than skilled, but enthusiasm will carry you far. Who doesn't love a competition among friends juggling five eggs, in which the winner celebrates by smashing the eggs on his head?

I learned a great deal about comedy during that time. Remarkably, I also became a more sophisticated reader of scripture, as scripture often turns to vaudeville to render a scene—more often than you might think.

Of course Lent doesn't seem like a time for comedy, while Easter does—the essence of comedy, after all, is surprise, and surprise is the essence of Easter. Lent is like the straight man, plodding along, mechanically moving toward catastrophe. If you were to build a comedy routine from Paul's assertion that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom," you couldn't do much better than Nicodemus, a member of a community that comedians make fun of with impunity. Nicodemus is an egghead with no common sense. At least that's how John plays it.

Imagine the story as theater: "Now there was a Pharisee." Heads nod. The theatergoers know him already, this stock character, a legalistic straight man. Even better, his name is Nicodemus, a Greek name for a leader of the Jews, and he comes to Jesus by night, which the crowd will attribute to cowardice.

If we were writing a comedy, Nicodemus would meet a quick-witted jester who would tie him up in linguistic knots and expose him to the world as a fraud. This is precisely what Jesus does, employing a pun that has tied Bible Belt Christianity in knots for generations: "I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born"—and here our quick-witted jester employs a word that can mean "again" or "from above," and the egghead chooses the wrong one, so that we who know the answer, who know that Christians are born "from above," can laugh when Nicodemus doesn't get it.

The pun is repeated. Laughter squirrels throughout the congregation. Nicodemus asks the most basic question, one that Mary would approve of: "How can these things be?" But it's comedy here: "And they call you a teacher of Israel?" Thirteen-year-old boys elbow each other. The husbands and wives exchange a look.

Then it's time to deliver the punch. The lesson is delivered not only from Jesus to Nicodemus but also from the early church to its doubters. Here's how I hear it: "We speak of what we know, but you won't listen. If you challenge everything we say because your wisdom is so much greater than ours, how will you ever know the truth if God should reveal it to those not as wise as you?"

The impulse of many writers would be to close the scene there, with their audience feeling vindicated against eggheads everywhere. John pushes through, however, plunging from lighthearted to deadly serious in one breath. It is this serious turn that our lectionary creators deem suitable for Lenten sobriety.

The jester asserts that only one who has seen the heavenly things can describe them and that "no one has ascended into heaven except for the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."

Until now, the jester has spoken words foreign to the teacher of Israel, but here he uses the language of the teacher's faith. Remember, Nicodemus, when poisonous serpents were killing Israelites in the wilderness, and Moses prayed to God that it might stop? God had Moses hoist a bronze serpent on a pole into the air so that whoever was in danger might look upon it and live. So, too, God has anointed a time where the one who ascends into the air, the one who has seen the heavenly things, the one who was born from above, will find himself hoisted upon a pole, and all those who see, who understand these words, will look upon him and live—all because God would rather save this world than condemn it.

Our dramedy ends with a word to the potential disciple about stepping into the light rather than slinking around in the darkness, and though these are not the words John employs, they carry the same meaning: God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, Nicodemus.

Nicodemus shows up twice more in the Gospel of John, which is, I suspect, a way to show him moving from the darkness to the light, from foolishness to wisdom. In the second episode he gently defends Jesus before the Pharisees, exhorting due justice (7:50). In the last, he prepares Jesus for burial (19:39). To this interpreter, it sounds

like a cue to the audience to join Nicodemus, who has moved from comedy to drama, finishing his scene by looking to the one who was lifted up so that we might live.