

March 8, Lent 2A (John 3:1-17)

## **Like Nicodemus, Kanye shows that the Spirit blows where it chooses.**

by [Amy Zietlow](#) in the [February 26, 2020](#) issue

On his gospel album *Jesus Is King*, Kanye West offers a prayer: “Clean us like the rain in spring / Take the chlorine out of our conversation . . . / We are water / Pure as water / Like a newborn daughter.” This song about conversation, authenticity, new birth, and water reminds me of Nicodemus talking with Jesus in John 3:1-17.

Prior to 2019, I would not have imagined putting Kanye West and Nicodemus in the same sentence. Nicodemus is a religious leader from 2,000 years ago. West is one of the top-selling artists of all time and is married to reality TV star Kim Kardashian. He has cultivated a controversial reputation: being chummy with President Trump, denying slavery, calling himself “Yeesus.”

Then, on a narcissistic road to Damascus, West experienced a dramatic conversion. His decision to transform a successful music career into a ministry surprised almost everyone. It definitely reflected Jesus’ observation that the Spirit blows where the Spirit wants. With the release of *Jesus Is King*, West chose to create only gospel music, promoted through his Sunday Service concerts. The album opens proclaiming his intention that “every hour, every minute, every second,” he’ll “sing till the power of the Lord comes down.” It closes with his profession of faith that “every knee shall bow, every tongue confess, that Jesus is Lord.”

Nicodemus and Kanye may hold a lot in common. First of all, they are both confused. They are held captive to the immanent frame of their world’s creating, yet intrigued by the divine promises of something more that are intimidated by the message and work of Jesus.

“Immanent frame” is a term coined by Charles Taylor and made understandable to me by Andrew Root’s book *The Pastor in the Secular Age*. The immanent frame defines our perceptions of our environment, our community, and ourselves in such a

way that God is opaque. We live in a world where all action of the divine is questionable and confusing. We struggle to see God's presence and purposes directly.

Reviewers have used the term "immanent frame" to describe Kanye's pre-Christian existence. He was leaning into this frame, defining himself by the trappings of this world and yet unfulfilled by them. He was like Nicodemus, a leader of the Pharisees, confident in his inherited knowledge of the world and his earned place in it but moved by Jesus' presence and abilities to wonder, "Is this all there is to life and faith?"

Second, both Nicodemus and Kanye seek meaning by entering into conversation with the divine. They ask, "How can these things be?" This question reflects their notice of the nearness of God. It suspends the power of the immanent frame and the temptation to limit reality to human terms of success. Answering this question will require a death to the self. Being reborn in the Spirit will usher in a new way of being in the world: a way of worship, service, and love. Both Nicodemus and Kanye will need lots of words to sort out what this new life will mean. Kanye relies on conversing musically with his many collaborators. Nicodemus talks at length with Jesus.

Finally, both Nicodemus and Kanye experience a conversion that is suspect in the eyes of their peers and religious communities. West anticipates the sidelong looks from Christians in the song "Hands On": "What have you been hearing from the Christians? / They'll be the first ones to judge me." Nicodemus must have anticipated that same type of suspicion from both Jesus' inner circle and his own. He comes to talk to Jesus at night, in secret. He knows his questioning would be met with unmerciful judgment by others.

Time will expose the authenticity of each man's conversion. Nicodemus takes his private faith public at the riskiest of times. When Jesus' body needs to be removed from the cross and buried, Nicodemus uses his power as a Pharisee to honor Christ's death with a burial that will make space for resurrection life. I imagine the disciples, terrified and in hiding, are grateful that Nicodemus is doing anything at all for Jesus when they cannot. He is for real.

West's foray into gospel music could be a passing fancy or a publicity stunt, but fans of his conversion surmise that anything that lifts up the redeeming work of God is

good. As Moses lifted up the serpent, as Jesus was lifted up, we are called to lift up the power of God for the sake of the healing of the world. Who are we to judge Kanye, who is trying to die to himself and lift high the cross? All eyes are on him to see where this conversion will lead. Time will tell.

But even if it doesn't, we have Jesus' answer: he came into the world not to condemn the world (or enable us to judge others as condemnable) but in order that the world might be saved through him. Kanye and Nicodemus are as redeemable as any other human. All things are possible with God. "Our God," writes Root, "who is a minister, may just move over these waters of impossibility."

The Kanye song I opened with sees God's Spirit as water pouring into our places of death and making us new. Later he calls out to Jesus: "flow through us . . . please heal." The season of Lent invites us to open our eyes to the life-giving presence of God around us: to note our wonder, to talk, to be changed. God may use surprising people to move over the waters of impossibility and minister to our souls.