In this part of John's gospel, it is still relatively early in Jesus' ministry. Jesus has gone to the river Jordan to be baptized by John and has called his first disciples. Then come a series of episodes that begin to unwrap for us the character and the promise of this Son of God. These are not the only things that Jesus does in his early ministry, but these are the events that help John paint a particular picture of Jesus Christ.

First, Jesus goes with his disciples to a wedding. He performs what might seem like an impromptu miracle which is really much more. The wine has run out before the guests are ready to leave so Jesus turns some jars of water into exceptional wine, far better than what was being served at the beginning of the wedding. In wedding protocol this doesn't make sense; everyone serves the good wine first and the inferior wine later, when the guests can't tell the difference. But John siezes upon a deeper meaning in the miracle: Jesus' action is a sign of God's activity in the world. It points to God's superabundant grace that John has already alluded to by telling us that through Jesus “we have all received grace upon grace.”

The next stop for John's Jesus is the temple in Jerusalem. It is near the time for the Passover so the temple is full of people. Rather than finding them worshiping, Jesus sees people selling animals to sacrifice and others taking different currencies and changing them for the money visitors need to buy the sacrifices. In a dramatic turn of events, Jesus fashions a whip and drives the whole lot of them – animals and handlers and moneychangers – out the temple doors. John interprets this dramatic act to say that because God has bestowed all the grace of God on the world through the Son, there is no need for any other kind of sacrifice in the temple any longer.

Next for John is the nocturnal visit of Nicodemus to Jesus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a teacher of the Hebrew faith. It would not be wise for him to come to Jesus in the light of day for Jesus is already on the Jewish authorities' radar; they know about his miracle at the wedding and his cleansing of the temple. If anyone sees Nicodemus visiting Jesus, it could be disastrous for his reputation, to say nothing of his job. It could also be that the night is the time when Nicodemus wonders and worries about his faith. Maybe Nicodemus has been lying awake and wondering: What if Jesus really is the Son of God? What if the ways Nicodemus has been teaching about God have taken a dramatic turn and Jesus truly embodies God's grace and love? What if being a faithful follower of God is not about following rules and laws but about following Jesus?

Nicodemus may not understand what Jesus is saying at first. Maybe he never understands him. After all, Nicodemus is fixated on earthly things and Jesus is speaking about the ways of heaven. Jesus asks Nicodemus to do something much more profound and more difficult than putting his life and job on the line; Jesus asks Nicodemus to be “born from above.” Of course, Nicodemus doesn't understand what this means. Does he have to go back into his mother's womb and be born again that way? Is that even possible? Do you hear the confusion and longing in Nicodemus' voice? It's hard for him to imagine being born again, but maybe he would do it if it meant he could get a “do-over” of his life, if he could erase all the mistakes he has made and chances he has missed and wrong turns he has taken. Nicodemus, of course, misunderstands Jesus, which gives Jesus the opportunity to teach the heavenly Word that he embodies.

As David Lose writes, “The Son of Man has been lifted up as a sign that God loves all the world. Even though the world in its very nature opposes him, yet the Son has come to reveal and demonstrate God's love and to lead those who believe to new life.” Salvation does not depend on what we think or don't think, on what we do or leave undone; salvation is God's love poured out through Jesus for the sake of the world. At this point in John's narrative, Nicodemus disappears without letting us know the intentions or decisions of his heart. We do have a strong clue about how things came together for Nicodemus, when he and Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body down from the cross and bury it in a tomb owned by Joseph. It is an act of pure worship and love.

Now to you and me. Doesn't it always seem that our deepest questions about life and faith happen in the middle of the night? Those hours spent in bed, eyes wide open, praying for sleep but haunted by the mistakes we have made or the promises we have not kept or whether or not our lives have real meaning. Some have called these nighttime worries the “dark night of the soul.” As F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote: "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning." These are the times when sleep eludes us, when we long to hear God's voice plainly telling us what to do, what to say. They are the times when we would give all we have to get a do-over of our lives. These are the times when God says to us, “Don't you see? I have given my Son to you, so that you know the deep, deep forgiveness of my love. Grace, mercy, peace: these are all my gifts to you. You don't have to lie in bed awake night after night. When you wake up each morning, it is to abundant new life. Every day is a clean slate, a do-over of its own kind. You have done nothing to earn this and nothing you can do will erase it. This is love from the heart of God. This is grace upon grace.”

Jesus' miracle at the wedding. His overturning of those making money in a place meant for worship. His conversation with one who wanted desperately to hear a new word of life and faith. These stories were all written and preserved for you and me, that we may demonstrate their truth in the things we say and do each day. When voices around us say we are to favor one group of people over another, we remember the voice of Jesus, saying, “God did not send me into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved by me.” When voices tell us that violence and war are the answers to our world's problems, we remember the voice of Jesus, saying, “Peace be with you.” When voices tell us that our own comfort is more important than our neighbor's, we remember the voice of Jesus, telling us to feed his sheep.

In the deepest, darkest, nights of the soul, if we are very still, it is possible to hear the voice of Jesus, telling us how much he loves us, sending us into the world to be the ones who love.

Amen.

*Lent 2A*

*March 12, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 3:1-17*

Choice would be ***faith***.  Faith is living like you are God’s person.  Faith is living your life trusting God every day.   Faith includes living by God’s rules and trusting God to love you and forgive you when you mess up.  Faith means living like Jesus.