May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Nicodemus “came to Jesus by night”. St. John is using night in a particular way. It’s not our usual understanding of the word. St John is using it to describe a condition or a circumstance. In St. John’s account of the gospel night is that time, Jesus says, “when no one can work” (Jn. 9:4). Our usual daytime activities have no power or meaning in the night. We are unable to create and sustain our own life in the night. Elsewhere Jesus speaks of night as the time when we stumble because there is no light in us and we just can’t see the way forward (Jn. 11:10). Night is the separation, fragmentation, and division within us that can become betrayal of ourselves and others. Remember Judas? He got up and left the table, St. John writes, “and it was night” (Jn.13:30). Night describes those times we fish all night but catch nothing (Jn. 21:3). Our efforts prove fruitless and our nets remain empty.

Coming to Jesus by night is not a statement about the time, Nicodemus’ motive, or his faith. It is, rather, a description of Nicodemus and his life, a description that probably fits all of us at one time or another. Coming by night is the recognition that there is a daytime Nicodemus and a nighttime Nicodemus; just as there is a daytime Audrius and a nighttime Audrius, a daytime you and a nighttime you.

By day Nicodemus knows who he is. He has an identity. He is a Pharisee. He has a role and a reputation as a leader of the Jews. He knows and applies the law. People listen to and follow him. He has a particular place in society. He fits in. He has security and power.

By night, however, Nicodemus is lost and confused. He cannot see or understand. Nothing makes sense. He’s in the dark, as we say. His work, accomplishments, reputation, and place in society no longer provide stability or answers. Everything has changed. He’s stumbling in the dark. Daytime certainty has given way to nighttime questions. “How can these things be?” By day he keeps the faith. By night, however, his nets come up empty. He’s looking for something the daytime life just cannot give him.

We probably all know what that’s like. We live daytime lives and we live nighttime lives. By day all is well. We live with a sense of identity and security. We have a place and purpose. Our life has meaning and direction. Daytime reveals what is, but darkness reveals nothing. By night everything is hidden. We stumble through the darkness, grasping for something to hold, seeking answers and explanations for our life. Everything has been turned upside down and nothing is certain. In the dark life doesn’t make sense and we don’t understand. The night is a time of vulnerability, questions, and wrestling with life.

We are almost always better at daytime living than nighttime living. We have been taught to live daytime lives. That’s what our world values, encourages, and rewards. We want to be daytime people. That means we spend our time looking for information and answers. We build our reputations. We desire recognition and approval. We establish our place in life. We buy stuff and gain wealth. We prefer what is safe and familiar.

It means no matter how hard we try, how much we gather, or how much we know something will always be missing from our daytime life. It will always be less than the life God intends and desires for us. No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born again. No matter how full, beautiful, or successful daytime life is it will always be incomplete, fragile, and fleeting. How could it not be? It’s the life we have created for ourselves and “what is born of the flesh is flesh.” When we realize that about our self and our life we have entered the nighttime of life.

Most of us do whatever we can to avoid or get out of the darkness. Nighttime living isn’t much fun. It’s difficult, uncomfortable, even painful. It’s not our first choice. It is, however, necessary. That’s why we are marked with ashes and reminded of our mortality. It’s why this season of Lent focuses on the very opposite of daytime living: letting go instead of possessing, hunger instead of fullness, self-denial instead of self-satisfaction, change instead of status quo and darkness rather than light.

The great temptation in the nighttime is to think that if we just get the answer, if we can understand and explain it all, then we’ll know what to do. We’ll do it better this time. We’ll do it differently this time. Things will change and we’ll get what we want. That’s what Nicodemus is doing. “How can these things be?” He wants an answer, information. That’s just more daytime living and it doesn’t work in the nighttime of life. The nighttime of life is not a situation to be resolved, a problem to be figured out, or a question to be answered. As difficult and painful as it may be the nighttime of life is the womb by which we are born from above. The discomforts of the darkness are the contractions by which we are pushed into new life and born again. This nighttime birth changes everything about our daytime life. This second birth gives meaning to, completes, and fulfills our first birth.

Lent is our reminder that the nighttime of life, no matter how dark, is always filled with the promise of new life, full life, abundant life, God’s own life – what Jesus calls eternal life. Amen.