

3.1.2026 Lent 2

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Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

“Born of the Spirit”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today’s gospel about Nicodemus and Jesus culminates with the most beloved verse in the Bible, John 3:16, as Jesus declares God’s mission of love for this world. God’s mission is not to condemn, but to save the world.

You know the story: a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. Nicodemus is “*a leader of the Jews*” which means he was likely a member of the Sanhedrin, the seventy-member ruling body of Israel, a wise man, and a scholar. We might call Nicodemus “a seeker,” and Jesus certainly senses this. John’s gospel says Nicodemus came by night, suggesting both caution and the desire to talk with Jesus privately.

Nicodemus is unique to John’s gospel and while he isn’t mentioned in the synoptic gospels, he appears two more times in John. In John 7, he stands among the chief priests and Pharisees who condemn Jesus for not teaching the law. There, Nicodemus says, “*Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?*” In this scene, the other leaders looked at Nicodemus, saying, “*Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.*” They found it impossible to imagine that God would speak in a new way. Nicodemus, now in the daylight, speaks up for Jesus, revealing God’s love beginning to work within him.

Nicodemus appears once again in John 19 after Jesus’ crucifixion, when he comes with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus’ body down from the cross and prepare it for burial. Just as Nicodemus had spoken up for Jesus, he now acts for Jesus to bury his body. Nicodemus doesn’t realize it, but he is already participating in God’s love for the world, because as Jesus was raised up upon the cross, he will also be raised on Easter morning to give eternal life to all who believe in him. Over two thousand years later, Nicodemus could not have known how his talk with Jesus would continue to inspire people around the world to also believe in God’s Son.

Sensing that Nicodemus was asking about the kingdom of God, Jesus replies, “*No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*” Nicodemus misunderstands this to mean a real physical rebirth. His misunderstanding stems from the Greek word *agothern*, which means to be born “from above” and to be born “again.” Rather than a spiritual birth from above, however, Nicodemus can only imagine a physical rebirth.

So, Jesus’ words, “*What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit,*” are meant to reveal that the entrance into the kingdom of God is all about a spiritual rebirth.

We are more than simply physical people – we are spiritual people who have been created to know God. We reach the kingdom through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Greek, the word *pneuma* means both “wind” and “spirit.” Jesus uses a metaphor describing the effects of the wind as observable, that it sovereignly goes where it pleases. Jesus says that the movement of the Spirit is similar, sovereignly goes where it pleases and that it cannot be controlled or stopped. The Holy Spirit is wholly Other. Jesus speaks in this way to help Nicodemus – and us – see that we are created with a receptivity to God’s grace, without which, we would never know the kingdom of God or eternal life.

It’s here that we can appreciate this reading anew during the season of Lent. Lent is an intentional time to return to the Lord – a time to remember there is more to life than our physical appetites of what we eat, touch, purchase and consume. Nicodemus certainly demonstrates this when he says, “*How can this be?*” I always hear a bit of playful humor in Jesus’ reply, “*Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*” Jesus’ words reveal that we can be learned in all manner of things and yet still not know the Spirit of God in our lives.

We might imagine Jesus speaking to us, saying, “Are you a Christian and yet you do not understand these things?” As you may have noticed, Christians can also be very legalistic about their faith, acting as if faith were a dogma to be adhered to, and imposed upon others, thereby turning Christianity into a new legalism that excludes many and accepts few. Jesus’ words aren’t aimed at only Nicodemus but also at many Christians who can be just as Pharisaical and unforgiving of others.

And so, we arrive at John 3:16. Jesus prepares us first by saying that if we cannot grasp earthly things, how are we ever going to believe in heavenly things? If we’re honest, we don’t always have a grasp of earthly things. Though we’ve mastered science and technology, we have not mastered loving and caring for one another. We know a lot, but we do not know how to sit down and talk with one another, to create peace, or how to welcome difference. We think that violence, bombing, and war will create peace, when history proves otherwise, that such actions don’t lead to lasting peace, they only sow the seeds of further conflict and war.

John 3:16 lays bare the secret of heaven: the breath of the Spirit moves like the wind over all the world, speaking a word called “love.”

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

The word “gave” as in “*gave his only Son*” means that God sent Jesus into the world and “gave” him up to the cross. God gave his Son with a mission of sacrificial love, the love of

God revealed on the cross for all people in this world. I invite you to look again upon our altar cross, turned to reveal the crucifix. This is what God's love looks like: God is hidden in suffering on the cross so that God might be revealed in the resurrection. God's love is for, not only Americans, but for every single person in this very broken and troubled world. Yet like Nicodemus, we continue to ask, "*How can this be?*" It is hard to love others when we hate, brutalize, and expel those whom our Lord Jesus also loves. Jesus calls us to figure out how to live with and love others, as he has loved us!

Today's final verse, John 3:17, reminds us that God sends Jesus into the world not to condemn the world but to save it. God is not in the "condemning business," God's business is to love and save. During Lent, we confess that we have also turned a deaf ear to our Lord who says, "*I give you a new commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.*"

God's promise of eternal life depends only upon love. Nicodemus helps us see how God's love works. Like Nicodemus, we are also people born of the Holy Spirit who helps us daily to speak and act for Jesus in this world. You are his voice and hands in this world.

We're each a bit like Nicodemus. Proud of our accomplishments, yet always coming to Jesus with our questions, fears, and doubts.

Come to Jesus again, and he will renew his Spirit within you.

Born of the Spirit, may you love others as Jesus has loved you. Amen.