

For God So Loved the World: Nicodemus, the Spirit, and Us March 1 2026:

C. Cavanagh, D. Min
Wall Street United Church

John 3:1-17

Oh how I love Nicodemus!

Picture him in this story — slipping quietly through the narrow stone alleyways of Jerusalem, alone, under cover of night, searching for Jesus.

He doesn't want to be seen with him — and there's a good reason why.

In the Gospel of John, in the story before this one, Jesus has walked into the outer courtyard of the temple, overturned the tables and driven out the vendors and money changers. Tables upside down, coins scattered, animals released!

Those vendors didn't simply provide a convenient service. They sold animals at inflated prices to people who had already travelled far in order to perform a sacrifice, and had already given much. And the money changers changed money at exorbitant rates — *everyone had to pay a temple tax*. Call it a Tariff if you like. And the system benefited the powerful. The priests received payment — they received meat. The poor paid the cost.

It was a system of injustice — sanctioned, normalized, and defended.

When Jesus threw down the tables, the temple authorities were furious — and Nicodemus was one of them! But strangely, instead of being furious, he's curious.

Now, some of you may be thinking: *Doesn't Jesus cleanse the temple near the end of his ministry in Holy week?* And you're right — in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But the Gospel of John tells the story differently.

In John's Gospel, the temple cleansing happens at the very beginning. It is the opening confrontation. Jesus and his disciples come to Jerusalem for Passover at the start of his ministry (as he will again at the end) and, if it's not sacrilegious to say so, *all hell breaks loose!* From the start, Jesus exposes how easily faith can be bent to serve power or our personal desires, and makes it clear that he won't stand for it.

So when we meet Nicodemus in this reading, the air is thick with anger. His colleagues are livid. Keeping silent probably feels safer than seeking truth.

And yet, Nicodemus still comes. Something has changed for him. You know what it's like, when you can't resist approaching God.

Perhaps he has watched this Temple system operate for years. Perhaps he knew it was wrong but felt trapped by loyalty, by fear, by peer pressure, by lack of confidence, or by the quiet benefits of privilege.

Perhaps he had asked himself the same question many of us ask: *What would it cost me to speak up?* Or perhaps he just never really paid attention, until Jesus came along and opened his eyes. And once you've seen the truth you can't unsee it.

That's where Lent meets us, calling us to open our eyes, to reflect on the needs for transformation within us and within the world.

Because injustice rarely survives on cruelty alone. We see that in schools with bullying, don't we? It survives on silence, on accommodation; on our reluctance to risk what we have.

And sometimes it relies on our reticence to look both outwards and inwards to see what needs to change in us.

Lent invites us to take that look. To ask ourselves, and God, where transformation is needed.

And here is the grace: When we ask, Christ does not turn away from our questions. Christ welcomes them.

Jesus listens to us, just as he listened to Nicodemus. When Nicodemus finally comes to Jesus, Jesus pauses and he listens.

To be born again

And Jesus answers him with words that feel strange and unsettling:

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." The ancient Greek word for *from above* is *anōthen*, and it's wonderfully layered. There are several possible translations:

Anōthen can mean born *from above*.

It can also mean born *again* or *anew*. You've probably heard some Christians talk about being 'born again'..

All these things come together when Jesus speaks, and in this translation they use the words '*from above*' to emphasize the Spirit.

Nicodemus hears it literally and is understandably confused. So Jesus presses further: "*No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.*"

And here's something striking: this is the only place in John's Gospel where Jesus uses the phrase *kingdom of God*. Only here. His concern is helping us experience as much as possible a taste of the kingdom of God on earth, and of course letting us know that there is a perfect kingdom where we will be welcome when our time here is done.

But it is the world that really matters to Jesus, because that's where *we* are, that's where *we* love and suffer. So while the reference to the Kingdom of God appears only twice in John's Gospel, Jesus talks about the world, 78 times!

That matters.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is not talking about escaping the world. It is about God's fierce, persistent love for it.

"For God so loved the world..."

Not the ideal world. Not the obedient or perfect world. The *real* one. Our world. With each of us unique but imperfect within it. Each of us in a process of becoming. In order to reach the kingdom of God, we need to go deeper into the world.

This is where we need to talk carefully about what it means to be "born from above" or "born anew."

In many evangelical traditions, being "born again" is understood as a single, decisive, emotional moment — a clear dividing line between before and after. From that moment on, you have a 'personal relationship with Jesus which you didn't have before, in their interpretation. You are saved! The work is done. The job now is just to avoid sin, and those who peddle it.

Well, I'm going to tell you right now that you're already saved. You are loved beyond measure, whether you experience such a moment or not. God wants your happiness. As it says in this Gospel, "**God did not send his Son into the world to**

condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:17)

And that’s the key. God does love each one of us personally, but God also loves the world. All of it! We glimpse the kingdom of God in our moments of happiness and joy, when we feel connected to others and true to ourselves.

So being born anew is not a finish line — *it’s a beginning*. Birth is always about a beginning.

Being born *anōthen* is not about personal salvation disconnected from the world’s pain. It is not about knowing a truth, and using it to judge, or worse, to condemn or avoid others. It is an invitation — and this is where it is personal — into lifelong transformation.

To be born from above is to be continually reshaped by the Spirit — again and again — so that we can love more deeply, more truthfully, more courageously. Lent reminds us to pay attention to that.

That’s why Jesus speaks of the Spirit as *wind*! You cannot control it. You cannot possess it. But you can feel its movement. You can see what it changes.

The Spirit loosens the grip of fear. The Spirit deepens our compassion. The Spirit gives us a courage we didn’t know we had.

It helps us to see what we must let go of, what tables must be overturned. We all carry burdens – anger, addiction, insecurity, grief, hurt, jealousy. The Spirit invites us to let go of the pain these things cause, and somehow, allow ourselves to be loved and to go on loving, stronger.

Mature Faith

Richard Rohr uses the term ‘mature faith’, not to speak of a faith where we do not struggle or we have all the answers, but a faith where we go forward anyway on a journey of transforming love, despite our fears and our questions. Those questions are important, and Lent calls us to ask questions — because we know we are loved, and we know we are called to grow in love. As he puts it,

“The goal of mature religion is to help us die before we die — to die to our small self, so that we can discover our Big Self.” So that we can be born to who we truly are.

That kind of dying is not about loss — *it's about freedom*. It's about letting go of who we think we have to be, so that love can grow. It's about being willing to really consider the deeper questions, to discern, and to allow ourselves to be transformed by the Spirit. It's a continuous thing.

And we can see that kind of transformation in Nicodemus.

This is his first appearance — curious and respectful but also cautious, hidden.

But it is not his last appearance. Nicodemus goes through a process of transformation throughout the rest of the Gospel. He appears two more times. In chapter seven, Nicodemus dares to speak up publicly in Jesus' defense, insisting that justice matters, that people deserve and have the right to be heard.

And in Chapter 19, when Jesus is dead and hope seems finished, Nicodemus comes fully into the open. He joins Joseph of Arimathea and claims Jesus' body.

He aligns himself with someone executed by the state. He risks his standing, his safety, his reputation, and really his life.

He brings spices to anoint the body.

He brings care to uphold Jesus' dignity.

And he brings his whole self into the light.

This is what being born from above looks like. Not instant bravery, but growing courage. A process of becoming, of transformation.

And this is where the Spirit meets us. The same Spirit that met Nicodemus in the night is present with us still. Patient. Faithful. Loving.

The Spirit does not abandon us when we are afraid. The Spirit does not shame us for our questions. The Spirit holds us as we grow.

A mature faith is not one that has all the answers. A mature faith is one that keeps asking honest questions.

Maybe this Lent we ask,

"Where is the Spirit inviting me to breathe more deeply?"

Where is love asking me to be a little more visible? A little more honest?

A little more courageous? There are many questions we can ask ourselves.

The good news is this: God is not finished with us. And God does not wait for us to be brave or sure before drawing near.

The work of transformation is not something we do alone. God meets us in the dark, speaks quietly, holds us gently, and stays.

Thanks be to God! Amen.