

Sermon for Lent 2-A March 1, 2026

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"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.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him."

There have been times in my life when life's struggles forced questions I would have preferred not to ask. Not academic questions. Not the kind you debate over coffee. But real ones - life questions. Questions born in suffering. Questions that surface in hard conversations. Questions that follow unanswered prayers. Grief that does not make sense. Situations that didn't resolve the way I prayed they would. Moments that overwhelmed my capacity to cope. Walking with people through heartbreak and injustice and wondering, "God, where are you in this?"

Those questions did not come because I wanted them to. *They came because life pressed harder than my explanations could withstand.* And Lent has a way of bringing those questions closer to the surface. Lent is not a season of easy answers. It is a season of honesty. A season where we admit we are dust. A season where we confront our limits, our frailty, our hunger for something more than what we can manufacture on our own.

On Ash Wednesday we heard the words: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” That’s not condemnation. It’s clarity. It’s an invitation to stop pretending we are self-sufficient. To stop pretending we can control outcomes, prevent loss, fix other people. Lent strips away illusion. And when the illusion falls, questions rise.

In this week’s Gospel, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He is a Pharisee. A leader. A teacher. A man well studied in the Scriptures and formed by Jewish tradition. If anyone should have had the answers, it was him. And yet he comes in the dark. He comes with confusion. With curiosity. With a sincere desire to understand what God is doing. I deeply resonate with that desire.

Because there have been nights - both literal and spiritual - in my own life when the struggles I was carrying pushed me into deeper questioning. And for a time, I thought that meant my faith was weakening. I thought strong faith required strong answers. I thought maturity meant certainty. *But life pressed harder than my explanations could withstand.*

And in those Lenten - like seasons - stripped down, uncertain, humbled - I discovered something deeper than answers. Grace - God’s presence - was holding me in those seasons when answers could not.

Nicodemus asks Jesus, “How can these things be?” It’s such an honest question. Jesus does not shame him. He does not say, “You should know better.” He does not withdraw in disappointment. He invites him into mystery. Not mysterious, but mystery - something our mind cannot comprehend but our heart and soul sure can. Our heart and soul can embrace the mystery of faith.

Jesus says, “Unless one is born from above...” He speaks of wind that blows where it chooses. Of a Spirit that cannot be controlled or contained. Of new birth that is a gift, not achievement. That is not an answer to solve; it is grace to receive.

For much of my life, I believed faith was primarily about getting it right. Understanding correctly. Articulating clearly. Defending faithfully. And those things matter. Thinking deeply about God matters. Theology matters. But I have learned — slowly, sometimes painfully — that faith is not sustained by airtight explanations. It is sustained by grace. Grace has steadied me when certainty wavered.

There were seasons when what once felt solid began to shift. Not because I stopped believing, but because I was being invited into something deeper.

There were prayers that did not unfold as I hoped. Outcomes that did not match my theology of how things “should” work. Moments when I stood beside suffering and knew no words would be enough.

And in those moments, I discovered that what people — and what I — needed was not a better argument. It was presence. It was compassion. It was the quiet assurance that we are not alone. That is grace. And that truth learned in my dark nights remains true today. And it is how I now meet people in their dark nights... With grace. With mercy. With kindness. With compassion. With presence without words...

Lent reminds us that we are not saved by mastering theology or eliminating doubt. We are not drawn into life because we solved the puzzle of suffering. We are drawn into life by God’s love and grace. Nicodemus came looking for clarity. What he received was an invitation. An invitation into a new birth. Invitation into a relationship. Invitation into trust. Faith is about putting our trust in what we cannot see or hear or comprehend, but our hearts know to be true. And from there we live our life of faith.

And here’s what I love about this life story of Nicodemus: this is not the end. Later in John’s Gospel, Nicodemus will defend Jesus. And at the cross — when others have scattered — he will step forward to help prepare Jesus’ body for burial. *The man who began in the dark grows into a man who acts in the light.* Love that! His questions did not disqualify him. They formed him.

And perhaps that is what Lent is doing in us. When life’s struggles push us into questioning, it does not mean we are failing at faith. It may mean we are entering it more deeply. Because faith is not the absence of questions. Faith is bringing those questions honestly to Jesus. It is saying, “How can these things be?” and staying in the conversation. It is allowing ourselves to be born from above — again and again — not through dramatic moments alone, but through daily surrender. *Through letting go of the need to control. Through releasing the illusion that we must understand everything before we can trust.* I love that!

There is a humility in Lent that I have come to cherish. It is the humility of dust. The humility of admitting, “I don’t know.” The humility of recognizing that my theology, as precious as it is, is not what ultimately saves me. Grace has reminded me that I am loved not because my theology is flawless, but because God so loves the world. And that love is sturdier than my certainty. It is wider than my doubt. It is deeper than my questions.

If you find yourself in a season where life has pushed you into asking things you would rather not ask — hear this clearly: You are not failing. You are not drifting beyond God’s reach. You are not less faithful because you are less certain. You may be standing

exactly where Nicodemus stood — in the dark, yes — but face to face with Jesus - the One who holds you in his tender mercy and care.

Lent gives us permission to come at night. To bring our confusion. To bring our grief. To bring our unanswered prayers. To bring the questions shaped by disappointment and fatigue.

And there, in the dark, we may discover what I have learned slowly over time: When answers fall short, presence remains. When explanations lose their weight, love holds. When certainty wavers, the Spirit still blows. And God's grace - not certainty, not perfection, not theology - is enough.
Amen.