



The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty  
Second Sunday in Lent – March 1, 2026

## God Loves the World in This Way

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



*Nicodemus Visiting Jesus, Henry Ossawa Tanner*

[John 3:1-17] *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 apart from the presence of God." 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 a 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."*

It is night when Nicodemus comes to find Jesus. It makes sense -- the most urgent questions can evade the clarity of daytime and only emerge in the dim hours when something unsettled in us refuses to settle back down.

When I learned Friday night just before bed that our country is at war with another, those dim hours were filled with questions for me. Today, as we watch the war expand and learn of the suffering of civilians, it reminds us how quickly life can take a sharp turn. Nicodemus' night feels less symbolic and more familiar.

Nicodemus is a devout Pharisee, an authority on God. He has given his life to learning how faithfulness works — how to live rightly, how to honor God, how to hold the world together through obedience and wisdom.

He trusts that Jesus is acting through God's power, yet something about Jesus troubles him. He has seen the signs of the Holy Spirit at work — water becomes wine at the wedding in Cana. The temple system turns upside down when Jesus drives out the moneychangers. But these

signs don't fit Nicodemus' picture of how God works, what God values. So he takes his confusion to Jesus, at night.

And what unfolds between them is not a debate, but the slow unraveling of certainty. Jesus doesn't answer Nicodemus' opening statement. Instead, he offers him a cryptic teaching. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Which is confusing, so Nicodemus assumes Jesus must be speaking literally.

He guesses this must mean starting over - - fixing what has gone wrong. Becoming someone new by effort or decision. But Jesus is saying something else entirely. The life God brings forth is not a project we undertake, but a new beginning we receive.

The Spirit moves like wind, he says — invisible and uncontrollable. We feel it before we can see its impact. For Nicodemus, this would be disorienting. He wants to be certain of his righteousness, but Jesus won't give him a rulebook.

So Jesus uses an analogy that Nicodemus would understand. He says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." He is reminding Nicodemus of a pivotal moment in the exodus of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. After many weeks of hard travel, they are tired, frustrated, and weary of manna. They complain to Moses, "We detest this miserable food. Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?"

Poisonous snakes then spread through the camp, bringing suffering and death. The people are terrified, and when they repent, God instructs Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole; although the snakes still remain, anyone who is bitten can look at it and live. The people survive not through escape from danger, but through turning toward the trustworthy source of healing.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that like this bronze serpent, the Son of Man will be lifted up, so that all may turn toward him and find healing and new life. And then comes the line we know so well we risk not even hearing it: "For God so loved the world that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Remember that to understand scripture, we have to pay attention to both translation and interpretation. This is especially true with John 3:16, because that one verse includes several key words that carry more depth than our English suggests: *cosmos*, *pistou*, *apolētai*, *aiōnion*, and even the small word *houtōs*.

One familiar way of hearing this verse goes like this: God loved the world so very much that he gave his only Son to die, so that those who believe in Christ will live forever. And the corollary: Those who don't believe in Christ won't. This imagines a God who loves us by sacrificing his son and whose primary motive is to evaluate our faith. If it is strong enough, we will go to heaven. If not, we will be punished.

But *cosmos* is bigger than our concept of the world; it encompasses every living thing. *Pistou* is not intellectual assent but trust. *Apolētai* refers not to punishment but being lost or ruined. And *houtōs* does not mean "very." It means "in this way."

So a closer translation of John 3:16 is: *God loved all creation in this way: he sent his only Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may not lose their life's meaning but may live in communion with God.* And the corollary: Trusting looks like turning one's heart toward God, leaning into the divine

within and all around us. This imagines a God whose primary motive is to draw us into deeper relationship and point us toward Christ, who shows us the Way.

Christians have grappled with the meaning of the cross for two thousand years, many times in even more violent circumstances than our own. Why did God become incarnate among us, only to die a brutal death? How is God loving the world when evil and violence are allowed to continue?

There are many models that explain the purpose of Jesus' life, some of them intellectual concepts that spring from Greco-Roman philosophy and others that reflect the faith and lived experience of Christ's followers then and now.<sup>1</sup>

But as we discussed at last Sunday's forum, even though there are multiple ways to understand Christ's life, death, and resurrection, there is a very consistent model for how we are to respond. Accepting and acting on God's grace means opening ourselves to transformation through Love. A transformation that is so deep and impactful it is like being born again, from above.

To be born from above is to live as though the world is loved. To see others not as threats to be sorted, but as companions in need of healing. To release the reflex of judgement in ourselves – and to resist the ways condemnation shapes how we act toward others. And underneath it all, to trust that the God who moves toward the world in love is still moving now.

This doesn't mean we close our eyes to what is happening all around us. Instead, we open them wider, taking in both beauty and suffering as we seek to be instruments of God's peace. We hold the longing for justice and renewal alongside the very real outrage, weariness, and grief of this moment.

It is night when Nicodemus comes to Jesus and the night remains for us. Yet even in the dim light, the invitation endures – to trust, to follow, and to turn toward the Love that meets us in wounded places and refuses to abandon the world.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Shout out to Jim Kearnes for his observation about conceptual vs. experiential models of atonement!