

**The Way of Life: Born Again**  
**John 3:1-17**  
**Sunday, March 1, 2026 | Second Sunday in Lent**

Last week we talked about the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry; about his baptism and about how, immediately after that baptism, Satan came to Jesus in the wilderness and sought to tempt him away from his identity and his ministry. How Satan tried to get him to behave and believe like an earthly king: to trust in himself and his abilities and his power rather than in God the Father. And we talked about how Jesus passed the test, rejecting Satan's temptations, showing how he would be a different kind of king, with a different kind of kingdom based not on earthly comforts, popularity, or power, but on love. He was finally ready to enter into his earthly ministry.

So, in today's scripture, we see Jesus near the beginning of that ministry, demonstrating his different-ness.

Now, by the time we get to today's scripture in chapter 3 of John's Gospel, Jesus has performed only one miracle, or, as John calls them, "signs," since they point like a signpost to who Jesus is. And this first sign points to just how different Jesus is from a "normal" king. If a "normal" king were going to perform a miracle, he'd do it in Jerusalem and he'd do it in front of the rich and powerful and influential. Instead, Jesus performed his miracle at the wedding of some friends of the family in the Galilean village of Capernaum. And it wasn't even a spectacular miracle. Almost no one at the wedding knew it had even happened. He simply turned about 30 gallons of water into wine, a symbol among his people of God's joy and abundance—the joy and abundance of God's kingdom.

And now, in today's scripture, Jesus is in Jerusalem, and he's getting a visit from one of the leaders of the Jews, the Pharisee Nicodemus.

Now, as a Pharisee, Nicodemus had some very clear ideas himself about God's kingdom. He believed that the Jewish people themselves *constituted* God's kingdom; that as long as they followed the rules that God had given them to live by, they would be God's kingdom on earth and that, if they followed the rules especially well, God would bless them with a Messiah who would, through military and political conquest, bring God's kingdom to the entire world. In Nicodemus' understanding of the world, the Jews were good and everyone else was bad. Rules were rules and were the key to pleasing God. Everything had its place and everyone knew where they stood.

Now, we don't know exactly why Nicodemus visited Jesus. He and the other religious leaders had certainly heard about Jesus. When he got to Jerusalem, he apparently performed some signs that John doesn't record. So, maybe Nicodemus is curious about Jesus' powers and intrigued by his teaching; he might actually be wanting to learn from Jesus. Or, probably more likely, Nicodemus might just be an emissary sent by the religious leadership to get a clear understanding of what exactly it was this Jesus believed and taught. And if that was Nicodemus' goal, he probably got a lot more than he bargained for.

So, Nicodemus starts the interview like any sophisticated Jewish religious authority figure would when dealing with a yokel from some God-forsaken place like Galilee. He starts with small talk, buttering Jesus up to put him at ease, complimenting him on his accomplishments and telling him how God must be with him.

But, of course, Jesus is having none of it. He knows why Nicodemus is there and so jumps to crux of the matter. He explains to Nicodemus in no uncertain terms what Nicodemus has come to find out: what Jesus believes and teaches. Jesus tells Nicodemus that the secret of real, true, abundant, eternal life isn't following a bunch of rules. It isn't who your parents are or where you're from. It's about being born from above, or in other translations, being born again. It's being born of the Spirit.

As Jesus explains it in response to Nicodemus' increasingly brief and confused questions, there's life, and then there's real life. There's the physical life which we are born into through our mothers. But our lives aren't intended to stop there. We were created for more. We were created to enjoy full, abundant, eternal life, Spirit-filled life, with God's love, joy, peace, and hope. We were created for a second birth, which comes when we are born again, from above, through God's Spirit.

Jesus tells Nicodemus something shocking. God's kingdom isn't going to come into being through political conquest. God's kingdom doesn't consist of any particular race or nationality. Entry into that kingdom doesn't depend on who your mother and father are. It doesn't depend on where you live. It doesn't depend on the color of your skin. It doesn't depend on whether you've always followed all the rules or whether you've been convicted of a crime. It doesn't depend on whether you've lived as an upstanding paragon within your community or you're living under a bridge. It depends on just one thing: whether you've been born again through God's Spirit.

This is so foreign to Nicodemus' understanding of faith that he doesn't know what to do with it. But he does appear to want to understand exactly how this new, born-again life happens. So, he sort of mumbles and stumbles one last question: "How can these things be?"

Which is a good question. And, more than likely, Jesus doesn't actually answer it here. Most of the Biblical experts think that Jesus stops talking at verse 11; that the rest of this passage is the apostle John's commentary and explanation of what Jesus has just said.

And in that commentary, John explains his understanding, as one of Jesus' closest friends and disciples, of how that new birth works. It's in that verse we are all so familiar with, John 3:16: "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." Receiving new and eternal life isn't about following rules, it's about believing in Jesus.

Now, as we've talked about before, belief in Jesus isn't just believing that he existed. It isn't just believing that he performed miracles. It isn't just believing that he once had a late-night conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. It isn't a question of believing anything *about* Jesus at all. As Jesus says later in John's Gospel, in John 17:3, "Now this is eternal life: that they *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

And, as we've also discussed before, the Greek word that is translated here as "know," has a much deeper meaning than to just know things *about* someone. It suggests intimate familiarity, as between a married couple. It suggests deep trust and deep love. Jesus says as much in Luke's Gospel when he acknowledges that the key to eternal life is to love God with everything you've got and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus has just started his ministry, and he's already making waves. He's already showing that he's different, and that the very nature of eternal life in God's kingdom is different than anyone had expected. We don't receive eternal life based on our national, racial, or even religious affiliation. It isn't about anything we can do. It's about a loving, trusting *relationship* with Jesus. It is trusting with your whole being that he *is* the one whose life, death, and resurrection has reopened the Way of life—the Way to eternal life.

And, at the same time, he's pointing out that the very nature of that eternal life isn't what Nicodemus had expected. It isn't some abstract state of righteousness before God. It isn't just resurrection after death. It is a new and joyfully abundant way of living—a *new* life—the moment you put your trust in Jesus.

Jesus is clear. That's why he's here. Born-again life.