

For God So Loved

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

March 1, 2026

2nd Sunday in Lent

John 3:1-17



When the night comes and you finally crawl into bed, does your mind turn off as easily as your bedside lamp? Are you able to let go of the day or is that when your mind makes space for all the things weighing on you? Maybe you easily fall asleep but later in the middle of the night, you find yourself staring into the darkness wrestling with your questions and doubts and uncertainty. The dark invites reflection because no one is there pulling you away from the stillness or distracting you from your thoughts.

In the stillness of the night, we have all asked some form of the question, “How can these things be?” Questions like this when directed to God are prayers, and our prayers offered in the dark of night are often more authentic and vulnerable than our more polished prayers offered in the light of day. The catalyst of a “How can this be?” prayer can come from a variety of places: from the fear of the unknown personally or globally, from the curiosity for a potential new thing, from the pain of grief, or from whatever within you that needs lifting into God’s light.

“How can this be?” prayers are offered in humility and in faith. The simple word “how” indicates humility because it acknowledges you don’t know everything and are open to learning. And no matter if the catalyst of the question is doubt, fear, curiosity, or anger, a question directed to God is always a prayer offered in faith.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in humility and in faith. He comes at night with a mind full of “how” questions and a heart open to listening to Jesus’ answers. The catalyst for Nicodemus coming by night was Jesus turning water into wine and turning tables in the Temple. As a Jewish leader Nicodemus has spent his life studying and interpreting the Hebrew scriptures, but what he has seen and heard about Jesus has caused him to re-examine what he believes. It has caused him to reevaluate how he experiences God’s presence in the world. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, but he comes to Jesus by night as a human being.

For Nicodemus to follow Jesus, he must let go of his identity as a Pharisee and re-examine what it means to be a person of faith. Re-examining an identity or belief you have carried for years can be challenging. Lent is a season of self-examination. Lent invites us to take things on or give things up, but it can also be an invitation to re-examine what we need to let go of so we can deepen our relationship with Jesus. Lenten practices often provide space for discerning if God is calling you to something new, and if so, what must you let go of so you can embrace this new thing.

In response to Nicodemus' questions, Jesus begins with metaphorical language about being "born from above" which only causes more questions. So, Jesus shifts his approach and begins connecting it to something Nicodemus can relate. "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, like us, can hear and feel the wind even without being able to see it.

We don't have to understand *how* God works to know that God is *at* work. We don't have to know how the Spirit comes or goes to recognize it at work among us. Even with Jesus shifting his example to better meet him where he is, Nicodemus is still confused and utters these familiar words, "How can these things be?" In the shadows of the night, Nicodemus comes in humility and in faith with "how" questions on his lips and trust in his heart that Jesus must be sent by God.

Nicodemus comes by night looking for answers, but Jesus is offering him new life. Life is an important word in John's gospel. He only uses the kingdom of God a couple times, but he uses *life* to describe the gift he brings to those who believe. In John's gospel, Jesus seems to use life and eternal life interchangeable. Many Christians think of eternal life as a reference to life after death, but this indicates Jesus is speaking about much more than life after death.

For John, eternal life is a characteristic of the present life of the believer as just a few verses later he speaks of eternal life in the present tense saying, "Whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life." Gail O'Day speaks to this in her commentary saying, "Eternal life" does not speak of immortality or a future life in heaven, but is a metaphor for living now in the unending presence of God.¹

Eternal life begins now as it points to life here on earth lived in the *awareness* of God's unending presence. We don't trust in God for a future time. We trust in God's love and mercy for today. We trust that God is calling us to be in relationship

¹ O'Day, Gail. *John*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. p. 45.

here and now and to participate in the life of Christ's reconciling work around us. God sent Jesus not for condemnation and judgement, but so that the world might be saved through Christ, so that the world might experience the unending presence of God here and now. This is the new life promised to Nicodemus, but until the crucifixion, one can't begin to understand what Jesus means when he speaks of life.

We can imagine more late-night conversations with God while Nicodemus lies awake in the dark. Conversations that will later, during a heated conversation about why the police didn't arrest Jesus, give Nicodemus the courage to say, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" Having the courage to speak up and advocate for Jesus at that moment points to the Spirit at work within him. The Spirit which will eventually guide him to join Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for burial.

Nicodemus didn't answer the call to follow Jesus immediately, but on that darkest day, when the disciples are nowhere to be found, Nicodemus will come out of the shadows and into the light. He will bring a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, a extravagant offer that reflects his abundant love for Jesus even before he could fully understand what Jesus meant when he said, "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."

In today's passage, we find Nicodemus On the Way With Jesus. God illumined a path in the dark of night to bring Nicodemus to Jesus, the light of the world. Nicodemus doesn't yet understand, but in humility and in faith, he comes to Jesus by night.

Let us come in humility and in faith. God invites us to keep bringing our prayers by night until we are ready to utter them in the light of day and advocate for Jesus in our authentic way. What "How can this be?" prayer are you uttering by night? How are those conversations with God in the dark of night preparing you to advocate for Jesus in the light of the day?

For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so we can experience the unending presence of God. God, who is love, sent Jesus to us in love, because God so loved the world. Amen.