

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH**  
**COMPASS, PA**

March 1, 2026—SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*God Loved First*”

Genesis 12:1-4a (God leads Abraham by faith to a new land)  
Psalm 121 (I lift my eyes to the hills, from whence comes my help)  
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 (Abraham believed God, and his faith became righteousness)  
St. John 3:1-17 (Nicodemus visits Jesus at night)

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John tells us there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader and teacher of the Jewish people. He was educated, respected, and religiously knowledgeable. He was familiar with the Scriptures and the traditions. He knew how faith was supposed to work. And yet, he comes to visit Jesus at night, with questions. St. John does not tell us exactly why he comes after dark. In fact, the evangelist is silent about the reason. And that silence is important. Because it allows us space to reflect—and possibly, to see ourselves better.

Maybe Nicodemus comes at night because he is afraid of what others will think—especially the religious establishment. Maybe doubts are easier to admit in the dark. Or, maybe nighttime is when certainty loosens its grip on us and honest questions finally surface.\* Some of you have been there. Awake at 3:00 a.m., staring at the ceiling, wondering, “Does anyone hear me? Am I all alone? Is there anyone who truly loves me?” Or perhaps you believe in God, but you’re struggling to know: “God, are You still with me? Am I still Yours? Can You give me a new beginning?”

We don’t need to be afraid of our darkness. In those dark times and those feelings of anxiety or doubt, God is not absent. In fact, because of the Incarnation, when God took on flesh in Jesus, God stepped into our darkness and brokenness in order to stand beside us. *Nothing* can separate us from the love of God. The Gospel story does not shame Nicodemus for going to Jesus in the night. It simply tells us that Jesus meets him there. This is already good news, because it means that darkness is not a barrier to God. Doubt is not a disqualification. Questions are not a failure of faith. The night is not the absence of God; it can be the place where we hear God speak.

So, Nicodemus finds Jesus in the dark of night. He acknowledges that he sees something happening in Jesus that cannot be explained away. Jesus answers, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Some might interpret this as a condition of being able to see God—something I must first do, myself, in order to be born from above. But Jesus does not tell Nicodemus what steps *he needs to take* to be born from above; rather, He announces what *God does*. This is not a command but a promise. Jesus isn’t telling Nicodemus—or us—what to do; He’s describing for all of us *what God does*. “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Nicodemus is understandably confused. “How can anyone be born after having grown old?” he asks. “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus is thinking logically. Literally. Practically. Jesus is speaking about something else.

Nicodemus has already told Jesus he “sees the kingdom.” He sees the reign and work of God. He knows that Jesus’ miracles, signs, and the beautiful, restorative, healing things associated with His ministry can only be from God. The fact that Nicodemus can recognize God in Christ is a gift! God is already giving him new life, a heavenly birth from above that allows him to know the Lord personally. To be born from above is to receive new life from God. It is not an achievement, or a decision on our part. It is a gift from God by His grace. Jesus is describing for Nicodemus the reality of God acting where humans cannot—doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Because *God loved first*.

Jesus says this new birth comes by “water and Spirit.” Not by water alone. Not by God’s Spirit alone, but by both. Water washes. Spirit breathes. Water cleanses what cannot clean itself. Spirit animates what cannot give itself life. This is creation language! God spoke life where there was none. In the beginning, God created. In the beginning, God created *us*. Now, through His Son, God is re-creating, renewing, and restoring all things. Jesus has ushered in the new creation.

This means new birth is not conditional. It does not depend on our openness, willingness, readiness, action, or courage. It happens because God loved first. I know from personal experience that the day I was reborn in Christ, I had nothing to do with it. I didn’t ask for it or even understand what it was. I just *needed* it. And God knew that.

To further explain that God takes the initiative in our salvation, Jesus next uses an image that neither Nicodemus—nor we—can control: “The wind blows where it chooses,” He says. “You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” Wind does not ask for approval. Wind does not follow schedules. Wind does not respond to human effort. We do not make the wind blow. We only discover it is already moving. So it is, Jesus says, with everyone born of the Spirit. This is not a description of human faithfulness—it is a proclamation of divine love and power.

The Spirit does not wait for us to raise our sails correctly. The Spirit does not hold back until we are brave enough. The Spirit is not summoned by sincerity. The Spirit moves because God is alive and because God loves first. That may unsettle us. It certainly unsettled Nicodemus. But it is also deeply comforting. Because it means new life does not rest on us. At this point in the conversation, Jesus shifts from imagery to history. From metaphor to promise: “No one has ascended into heaven,” he says, “except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” New life, new birth does not happen because humans ascend to, or reach, God. It happens because *God comes to us*.

And then Jesus reaches back into Israel’s story. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” Moses is one of the most important people in the Old Testament because he led the Israelites when God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. This is not a random reference. In that story, the people are dying. Snakes bite them. They are helpless. They cannot cure themselves. They are cured and “saved” because a bronze snake was “lifted up” by Moses (Numbers 21).

A bizarre story, indeed. However, its imagery points to Jesus saving us and giving us new birth and new life when *He* was “lifted up” on the cross. Here is the heart of the Gospel proclamation: God saves the world by giving His only Son. We now arrive at the verse that appears on bumper stickers, key chain fobs, T-shirts, and football signs. For many Christians, it’s the only Bible verse they’ve memorized: “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.” Notice what comes first: *Love*. And notice who is loved. The world. God’s actions flow from God’s love. Always. God does not send the Son because God really hoped the world would be faithful. God sends the Son because *God* is faithful. And the giving of His Son is not symbolic. It is real, and costly. Jesus is lifted up *for us*. Jesus endures death *for us*. Jesus bears what we cannot bear, so that we might be forgiven and saved from hell and death—even now as we continue to live. This is what “eternal life” means in John’s Gospel. Not merely life after death or life that lasts forever, but life that begins now because Jesus has overcome death.

Jesus next speaks even more explicitly: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” If condemnation is what people hear from the Church, then they have missed the heart of the Gospel. God’s movement toward the world is not accusation. It is a *rescue*. A story shaped by the life of the triune God. For the Father loves the world and sends the Son. The Son descends, is lifted up, and gives Himself for the life of the world. After His resurrection and ascension, the Spirit gives new birth, breathes into us new life, and sustains what God has begun. New birth is not something we can achieve on our own. It is the shared work of Father, Son, and Spirit.

We only hear Nicodemus’ name three times in the Gospel according to St. John, yet each moment adds depth to the story of this faithful Pharisee. The first time he’s mentioned is here in John 3, where he comes hesitantly to Jesus at night with questions.

Later in St. John's gospel, Nicodemus speaks up quietly for justice when the religious leaders are scheming against Jesus. And at the end, he will come to help bury Jesus' body after His death on the cross. That time, Nicodemus showed up openly—along with His fellow member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea, who was actually a disciple of Jesus, but secretly.

New birth is not always instant. Sometimes it unfolds slowly. Sometimes it takes root in the dark. Sometimes it appears hidden to others. But God is faithful to continue growing us in that new life over time.

When God gives new life from above, our perception of everything changes. We begin to see the world and everyone in it—including ourselves—differently. We recognize God's kingdom; we see that God is already at work in the world, restoring, healing, and drawing people toward life. We discover where God is already present and we want to join in.

Sometimes that means simple acts of care. Other times, it may mean standing with those who are ignored or pushed aside. Or it may mean telling the truth about hope in the midst of uncertainty. Whatever it looks like, mission and ministry flow from God's love already given. God gives new life from above, and that life quietly, steadily spills outward for the sake of the world whom God loves. God is faithful. God is active. God gives new life. "For God so loved the world ..." is a promise that God's love is wider than your doubt, deeper than your fear, and stronger than death itself. As 1 John 4:19 reminds us: "We love because God loved us first." *God loved first.*

### **Let us pray:**

Help us, dear God, to let our old selves die. By your grace, let us be reborn in You and see through You the world in the right way, so that all of our actions, words, and thoughts may witness to Your glory and become a hymn of praise to You. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord, *Amen.*<sup>+</sup>

<sup>+</sup> Adapt. Chris Breslin, "Year A, Lent 2" 1 March 2026, [Equipper](https://equipper.gci.org/2026/02/sermon-for-march-1-2026-second-sunday-in-lent/), Grace Communion International <<https://equipper.gci.org/2026/02/sermon-for-march-1-2026-second-sunday-in-lent/>> 23 February 2026.

<sup>+</sup> Adapt. Henri Nouwen, "Prayer to be Reborn in You," [MadeNew](https://youaremadenew.com/prayer-reborn-in-you/#:~:text=Help%20me%20%20Lord%20%20to,selffreedom%20in%20ChristPrayer) <<https://youaremadenew.com/prayer-reborn-in-you/#:~:text=Help%20me%20%20Lord%20%20to,selffreedom%20in%20ChristPrayer>> 23 February 2026