

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² 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.” ³ Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴ 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?” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸ 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.” ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ “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. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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. ¹⁷ “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.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

John 3:1-17

03/01/2026 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“Lent 2: Into the Night”

Rev. Amy Terhune

How many roads must a man walk down
before you call him a man?
Yes, 'n' how many seas must a white dove sail
before she sleeps in the sand?
Yes, 'n' how many times must the cannonballs fly
before they forever are banned?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind;
the answer is blowin' in the wind.

You know those words. Even kids today know those words, many of them. I read somewhere that it's ranked in the top ten of the most recognizable songs of the 20th century by Billboard Magazine, but I couldn't document that source, so I don't know if it's true. But it has been sung by everyone from Peter, Paul, & Mary to Joan Baez, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Pete Seeger, a Dutch rapper named Gggolddd and even the puppets on Sesame Street. It's also been translated into a dozen languages. I learned it as a child at Christ United Methodist Church in Deerfield, Illinois, and studied it again in my

intro to poetry class at U of M, which is arguably a little strange. But here's what one scholar wrote: "Blowin' in the Wind," Bob Dylan's classic 1962 protest song, has had a long, rich life as an anthem for causes from civil rights to nuclear disarmament. In this song, the speaker poses a series of huge questions about the persistence of war and oppression, and then responds with one repeated, cryptic reply: "The answer, my friends, is blowin' in the wind." Finding an end to human cruelty, the song suggests, is a matter of understanding a truth that's all around—but paradoxically impossible to grasp." [from <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/bob-dylan/blowin-in-the-wind>.] The song resonates with me today because I'm still asking as cannonballs fly in Iran how long it will take for humankind to recognize that nobody really wins when war is our course of action. But in truth, *Blowing In the Wind* comes to my mind every time I read about Nicodemus trying to understand how the Spirit moves.

I have some sympathy for Nicodemus. He shows up at Jesus doorstep at night. Fuel was as expensive and as hard to come by then as it is now, so when it got dark, folks put out the lamps and went to bed. But not Nicodemus. When everyone else went to bed, he went out into the night, through the dark streets to the home of an itinerate preacher that was leaving most of the Pharisaic establishment baffled and a little annoyed. Why? I mean, sure he's a Pharisee, and a big wig Pharisee at that – he's a member of the Sanhedrin, and that's a pretty prestigious group of leaders – so it's entirely possible that he spends long days teaching, praying, leading, crafting messages and lesson plans, and this is the only time he's got.

But I rather suspect he can't be seen talking to Jesus – at least, not having the conversation he really wants to have. We can deduce quite a bit about Nicodemus. Given that he's on the Sanhedrin, he's probably very well educated, very intelligent, somewhat wealthy, and connected to all the right bloodlines. And I suspect he's also a devout believer. People don't rise to positions like that if they're not walking the walk. In scripture, Pharisees tend to get a bad rap, but most modern scholars believe the tension between the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus isn't because they are polar opposites but because they have quite a bit in common. We Christians like to write off the Pharisees as rule-followers; people who were only interested in jumping through hoops in order to hold on to power and prestige. And I'm sure that some were. But the scriptures that the Pharisees studied speak of how God transforms stone hearts into flesh, how God lights up the mind and the soul, how God cares for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the poor, and the sick. Jesus did not invent compassion or spirituality. Those things have always been marks of the faithful. There have been many throughout time that not only sought to be good, but to do good. Moses, David, Elijah, Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah – all of these great Hebrews had experiences of God that changed them, transformed their hearts, renewed their hope, re-energized their life and gave them courage to live their faith. Nicodemus is squarely in that tradition.

See, there's a need, a hunger inside Nicodemus for something more. All his life, Nicodemus has been told how to get to God. And he's done it faithfully – followed every rule, offered every sacrifice, devoted every bit of energy to doing what's right. But something is missing. And so instead of condemning Jesus as a heretic or a lunatic, he does something truly courageous. He seeks out a conversation. Nicodemus takes a calculated risk. He goes out into the night to talk to Jesus, to understand, to learn more, to try to discover if Jesus is the charlatan his colleagues think he is or the savior his followers think he is.

And Jesus lets him in, engages him, challenges him. What you need to understand to start is that modern biblical translators have done the heavy lifting in this passage, but Jesus is use words that have more than one meaning. I can recall a time when I was doing a children's sermon with the kids at Port Huron. I was talking about the time Jesus healed a leper, and I was trying to explain what leprosy is. The kids were looking at me kind of blankly, so I asked them if any of them had ever had chicken

pox. That's when one little boy who was barely three years old, bless his heart, answered me saying, "No, but I've had Chicken McNuggets!" That's about where Jesus and Nicodemus are. The words are the same, but the meanings are worlds apart. In particular there are three Greek words worth noting. First, there's *Anōthen*, which means both "again" and "from above". Then there's *Pneuma*, which means both "wind" and "Spirit". And lastly, there's *Hypsoō*, (hipsuh-oh) meaning both 'to lift up' and 'to exalt'. [I am indebted to Gail R. O'Day, Commentary on John 3:1-17 in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press) pages 548-553 for her definitions of *Anōthen*, *Pneuma*, and *Hypsoō*.] Nicodemus hears these terms in their most literal sense. Biological rebirth, blowing wind, and lifted symbols reminiscent of the Moses' healing those in the desert bitten by snakes. But Jesus is using those terms on multiple levels all at once. And he prods Nicodemus to dig deeper, to grow in his awareness of the layers and strata of faith.

Several years ago now, a movie came out entitled "Chocolat" and starring Juliette Binoche. It's the story of a woman and her daughter, who literally follow the wind and move from one place to another. As the story opens, they arrive in a strict little Catholic village in France just as Lent is beginning, and proceed to open a chocolate shop. The townspeople are shocked—a chocolate shop? In Lent? It's too sinful, too decadent, too self-indulgent for Lent, when one is supposed to sacrifice. Yet little by little, some residents begin to discover that in her chocolate there is healing. This stranger's chocolate is not candy—it is medicine infused with something indescribable—and through it, a marriage finds its spark again, a young woman finds her confidence, a grandmother and grandson reconnect, and an elderly man and woman who have passed each other on the street for decades finally find the courage to fall in love. The chocolate, of course, is symbolic for the richness of life—joy, love, hope—things don't take a hiatus in Lent. Rather, they contribute to our own self-examination and healing. There are those in town who resist, who refuse to see the goodness of what she brings. But there are also those who are transformed and renewed.

And that's the same message Jesus is attempting to communicate to Nicodemus: there is this kingdom, my kingdom, a kingdom of the heart, a kingdom of the spirit. And it's right here among us, but in order to enter it, you will need to let God work within. You will need to open yourself to a new level of devotion, a new capacity for love, a new set of eyes by which to see the world—eyes filled with compassion and acceptance and forgiveness. And it's not something you can do, Nicodemus. It has to come from God. It's like the wind—just be still, open the windows of the soul, and let the wind take you where it will. It's hard to relinquish control like that, isn't it? But I am convinced that it is in the giving up ourselves to the wind of the Holy Spirit that we are transformed into beings through which the Spirit can be channeled and directed for advancing the Kingdom.

What Jesus is so good at is connecting with people where their interests lie, so he directs Nicodemus' memory back to Numbers 21, to their own history, when Moses made a serpent out of bronze, so that anyone who had been bitten by the serpents in the desert could look up at it and live. Just so, the Son of Man must be lifted up, says Jesus. The physical act of raising up the cross with the dying form of Jesus nailed to its beams is the spiritual moment in which he is exalted. The cross of crucifixion—the symbol of shame, desertion, agony, defeat is at the same time the symbol of glory, of God's solidarity with us, of love and of victory. In God, everything is transformed, made new. When we are born from above, we are under an entirely new paradigm of life—an entirely new ideology. And what is that paradigm? That ideology?

For God so loved the world. That's where this is going. These incredible words that have meant so much to so many for so long are Jesus' gift to Nicodemus. It's about love. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He's followed every rule in the book. But he has forgotten that the reason God gave the law in the first

place. It was to form a covenant, a relationship, a sacred bond. No wonder he's disillusioned. No wonder he's hungry for something.

Jesus met Nicodemus in the night. And maybe Jesus invites him to lay down the weight he carries – leader, teacher, councilman, example. Maybe Jesus turns his world a little. Maybe Jesus invites him to consider that all his life, he's been told that God responds to what he does. If I do this, God does that. If I sin, God condemns. If I do good, God rewards. But maybe God wants to take the lead in your life; wants you to do the responding, wants you to follow Him instead of just following the rules. It's not about rules, it's not about doing enough things right. It's about relationship. It's about love. It's about entering into the saving grace of Jesus Christ with our whole selves. So go with it. Let the Spirit move. Consider that maybe you don't have to carry the weight of the world. God's got it. God loves it. And God is working to save it. Instead, carry the light to those in the dark. Carry hope to those crushed with despair. Carry truth to those still blowing in the wind: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may live. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but to save it. Thanks be to God. Amen.